WORLDS OF TOMORROW

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THE NIGHT OF THE TROLLS
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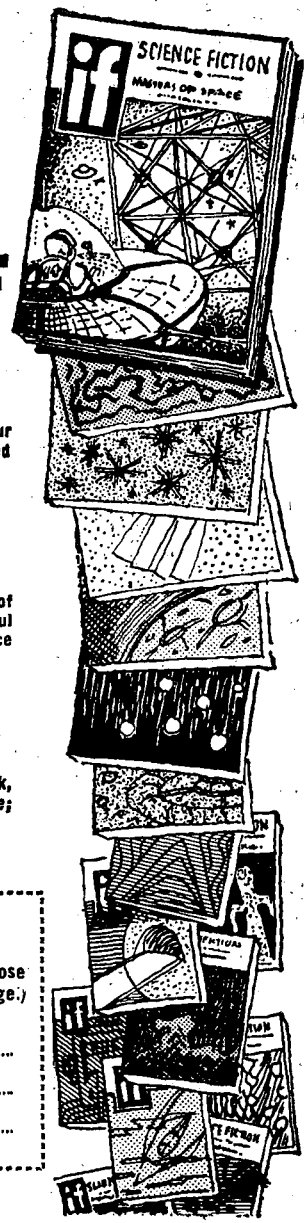

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WORLDS OF TOMORROW®

OCTOBER 1963

Vol. 1 No. 4

ALL NEW STORIES

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NOTES
from the editor's pad

We never argue with our Esteemed contributors, especially when the Contributor is so deserving of Esteem as Stephen Barr, but we can't resist the temptation to shove our oar into this mirror-image business.

The question, as you'll know if you've read *Orphans of Science,* is: "What the dickens is it that the mirror does that reverses things from left to right? and if it's going to reverse things at all, why doesn't it reverse them from top to bottom once in a while?"

What Mr. Barr says is straight from the master, but we had the feeling that there was more meat to the question. The thing is, mirrors don't reverse. They don't know how. All they know how to do is to bounce back whatever hits them, and bounce it back in the spatial relationship in which it is received. Take this copy of *Worlds of Tomorrow* and look at it. You see the "t" in "tomorrow" on the left, and the "w" on the right. Now hold it up to the mirror, and look again. The "w" is on the left . . . and the "t" is on the right.

But the mirror didn't turn it around.

You did.

And when you turned it around, you reversed it from left to right.

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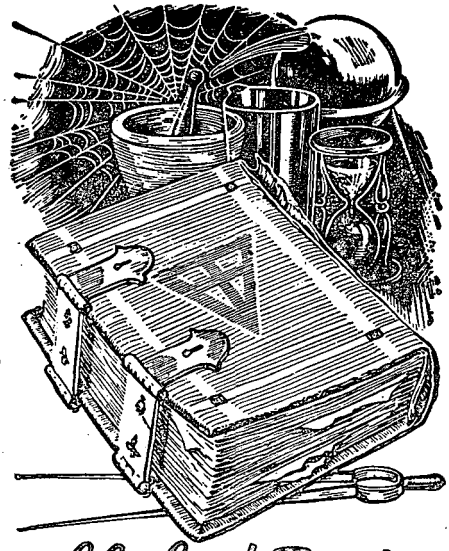
Secrets entrusted to a few



The Unpublished Facts of Life

THERE are some things that cannot be generally told—*things you ought to know.* Great truths are dangerous to some—but factors for *personal power* and *accomplishment* in the hands of those who understand them. Behind the tales of the miracles and mysteries of the ancients, lie centuries of their secret probing into nature's laws—their amazing discoveries of *the hidden processes of man's mind,* and *the mastery of life's problems.* Once shrouded in mystery to avoid their destruction by mass fear and ignorance, these facts remain a useful heritage for the thousands of men and women who privately use them in their homes today.

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If you had rotated it on the horizontal axis instead of the vertical you would have reversed it top to bottom—but, gravity-oriented creatures that we are, we don't do things that way. But no matter what, the mirror reverses nothing: it's all you.

Sign of the space age: We were down at Cape Canaveral the other day, looking to see if everything was all right—well, ostensibly on a research briefing to get some background on the hardware that is putting people in the flesh where we have been putting them in fiction for the past couple of decades, but actually, we confess, doing nothing more complicated than making a pilgrimage of devotion. We enjoyed it all very much and came away with the impression that our space program is in the hands of some exceedingly competent, brilliant and hard-headed men. But we noticed something that amused us. Outside the gates of Patrick Air Force Base is a highway billboard, like many another in all respects but one. The difference is that it does not advertise soft drinks, girdles or gasoline: for the space-minded travelers of Cocoa Beach, even outdoor advertising changes its goals. The legend on the board is:

LOW-TEMPERATURE
MODULES FOR ALL PURPOSES

The series of articles on the general theme of how science fiction is turning into science before our eyes, which we started in the June issue, digresses slightly with this number but returns to its main theme next month with a roundup on *Science versus Science Fiction: Who Borrows What?* which we think you'll like. Meanwhile we're still flooded with comments on the lead-off article in our series, R. C. W. Ettinger's *The Prospects of Immortality*. As you remember, what Mr. Ettinger had to say was that immortality, or at any rate indefinitely prolonged life—a familiar notion in science fiction for thirty years or more—is all but in our grasp right now, and may indeed be available by means of freezing at exceedingly low temperatures.

At last count at least a dozen radio and television programs had devoted up to five hours each discussing this provocative theme, based on our publication of the piece; moreover, Doubleday is soon to come out with an expanded and much more detailed book setting forth Ettinger's complete plan, with a foreword by the man who is perhaps the dean of biochemists in the world, Jean Rostand.

Meanwhile, to all those who have written in comments, suggestions or reactions to *The Prospects of Immortality*: We've passed them on to Mr. Ettinger, but we happen to know that he's swamped with mail. What we suggest is that you wait till the book comes out—your question may be answered there—and meanwhile, we pass on our gratitude and Mr. Ettinger's for your response.

That's about all that's on our pad to tell you about this time. Meanwhile—you've got an issue we like here; hope you like it too.

—FREDERIK POHL

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THE NIGHT OF THE TROLLS

BY KEITH LAUMER

ILLUSTRATED BY NODEL

The machine's job was to defend its place against enemies—but it had forgotten it had friends!

I

It was different this time. There was a dry pain in my lungs, and a deep ache in my bones, and a fire in my stomach that made me want to curl into a ball and mew like a kitten. My mouth tasted as though mice had nested in it, and when I took a deep breath wooden knives twisted in my chest.

I made a mental note to tell Mackenzie a few things about his pet controlled - environment tank—just as soon as I got out of it. I squinted at the over-face panel: air pressure,

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temperature, humidity, O-level, blood sugar, pulse and respiration — all okay. That was something. I flipped the intercom key and said, "Okay, Mackenzie, let's have the story. You've got problems . . ."

I had to stop to cough. The exertion made my temples pound.

"How long have you birds run this damned exercise?" I called. "I feel lousy. What's going on around here?"

No answer.

This was supposed to be the terminal test series. They couldn't all be out having coffee. The equipment had more bugs than a two-dollar hotel room. I slapped the emergency release lever. Mackenzie wouldn't like it, but to hell with it! From the way I felt, I'd been in the tank for a good long stretch this time — maybe a week or two. And I'd told Ginny it would be a three-dayer at the most. Mackenzie was a great technician, but he had no more human emotions than a used-car salesman. This time I'd tell him.

Relays were clicking, equipment was reacting, the tank cover sliding back. I sat up and swung my legs aside, shivering suddenly.

It was cold in the test chamber. I looked around at the dull gray walls, the data recording cabinets, the wooden desk where Mac sat by the hour re-running test profiles —

That was funny. The tape reels were empty and the red equipment light was off. I stood, feeling dizzy. Where was Mac? Where were Bonner and Day, and Mallon?

"Hey!" I called. I didn't even get a good echo.

Someone must have pushed the button to start my recovery cycle; where were they hiding now? I took a step, tripped over the cables trailing behind me. I unstrapped and pulled the harness off. The effort left me breathing hard. I opened one of the wall lockers; Banner's pressure suit hung limply from the rack beside a rag-festooned coat hanger. I looked in three more lockers. My clothes were missing—even my bathrobe. I also missed the usual bowl of hot soup, the happy faces of the techs, even Mac's sour puss. It was cold and silent and empty here — more like a morgue than a top priority research center.

I didn't like it. What the hell was going on?

There was a weather suit in the last locker. I put it on, set the temperature control, palmed the door open and stepped out into the corridor. There were no lights, except for the dim glow of the emergency route indicators. There was a faint, foul odor in the air.

I heard a dry scuttling, saw a flick of movement. A rat the size of a red squirrel sat up on his haunches and looked at me as if I were something to eat. I made a kicking motion and he ran off, but not very far.

My heart was starting to thump a little harder now. The way it does when you begin to realize that something's wrong — bad wrong.

Upstairs in the Admin Section, I called again. The echo was a little better here. I went along the corridor strewn with papers, past the open doors of silent rooms. In the

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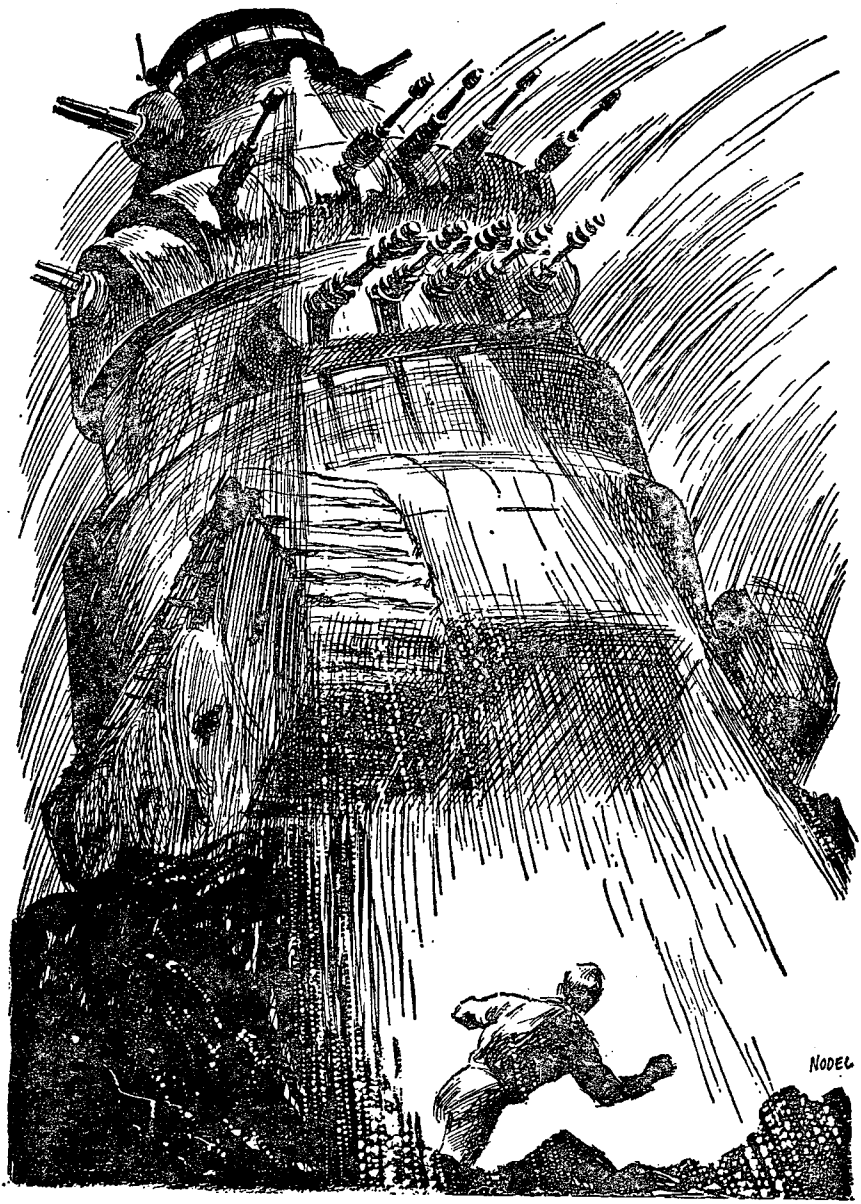

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Director's office, a blackened waste-basket stood in the center of the rug. The air-conditioner intake above the desk was felted over with matted dust nearly an inch thick. There was no use shouting again.

The place was as empty as a robbed grave — except for the rats.

At the end of the corridor, the inner security door stood open. I went through it and stumbled over something. In the faint light, it took me a moment to realize what it was.

He had been an M. P., in steel helmet and boots. There was nothing left but crumbled bone and a few scraps of leather and metal. A .38 revolver lay nearby. I picked it up, checked the cylinder and tucked it in the thigh pocket of the weather suit. For some reason, it made me feel a little better.

I went on along B corridor and found the lift door sealed. The emergency stairs were nearby. I went to them and started the two hundred foot climb to the surface.

The heavy steel doors at the tunnel had been blown clear.

I stepped past the charred opening, looked out at a low gray sky burning red in the west. Fifty yards away, the 5000-gallon water tank lay in a tangle of rusty steel. What had it been? Sabotage, war, revolution — an accident? And where was everybody?

I rested for a while, then went across the innocent-looking fields to the west, dotted with the dummy buildings that were supposed to make the site look from the air like another stretch of farm land complete with barns, sheds and fences. Beyond the site, the town seemed intact: there were lights twinkling here and there, a few smudges of smoke rising.

Whatever had happened at the site, at least Ginny would be all right — Ginny and Tim. Ginny would be worried sick, after — how long? A month?

Maybe more. There hadn't been much left of that soldier . . .

I twisted to get a view to the south, and felt a hollow sensation in my chest. Four silo doors stood open; the Colossus missiles had hit back — at something. I pulled myself up a foot or two higher for a look at the Primary Site. In the twilight, the ground rolled smooth and unbroken across the spot where *Prometheus* lay ready in her underground berth. Down below, she'd be safe and sound maybe. She had been built to stand up to the stresses of a direct extra-solar orbital launch; with any luck, a few near-misses wouldn't have damaged her.

My arms were aching from the strain of holding on. I climbed down and sat on the ground to get my breath, watching the cold wind worry the dry stalks of dead brush around the fallen tank.

At home, Ginny would be alone, scared, maybe even in serious difficulty. There was no telling how far municipal services had broken down. But before I headed that way, I had to make a quick check on the ship. *Prometheus* was a dream that I — and a lot of others — had lived with for three years. I had to be sure.

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I headed toward the pillbox that housed the tunnel head on the off-chance that the car might be there.

It was almost dark and the going was tough; the concrete slabs under the sod were tilted and dislocated. Something had sent a ripple across the ground like a stone tossed into a pond.

I heard a sound and stopped dead. There was a clank and rumble from beyond the discolored walls of the blockhouse a hundred yards away. Rusted metal howled; then something as big as a beached freighter moved into view.

Two dull red beams glowing near the top of the high silhouette swung, flashed crimson and held on me. A siren went off — an ear-splitting whoop! *whoop!* WHOOP!

It was an unmanned Bolo Mark II Combat Unit on automated sentry duty — and its intruder-sensing circuits were tracking me.

The Bolo pivoted heavily; the whoop! whoop! sounded again; the robot watchdog was bellowing the alarm.

I felt sweat pop out on my forehead. Standing up to a Mark II Bolo without an electropass was the rough equivalent of being penned in with an ill-tempered dinosaur. I looked toward the Primary blockhouse: too far. The same went for the perimeter fence. My best bet was back to the tunnel mouth. I turned to sprint for it, hooked a foot on a slab and went down hard . . . .

I got up, my head ringing, tasting blood in my mouth. The chipped pavement seemed to rock under me. The Bolo was coming up fast. Running was no good, I had to have a better idea.

I dropped flat and switched my suit control to maximum insulation.

The silvery surface faded to dull black. A two-foot square of tattered paper fluttered against a projecting edge of concrete; I reached for it, peeled it free, then fumbled with a pocket flap, brought out a permatch, flicked it alight. When the paper was burning well, I tossed it clear. It whirled away a few feet, then caught in a clump of grass.

"Keep moving, damn you!" I whispered. The swearing worked. The gusty wind pushed the paper on. I crawled a few feet and pressed myself into a shallow depression behind the slab. The Bolo churned closer; a loose treadplate was slapping the earth with a rhythmic thud. The burning paper was fifty feet away now, a twinkle of orange light in the deep twilight.

At twenty yards, looming up like a pagoda, the Bolo halted, sat rumbling and swiveling its rust-streaked turret, looking for the radiating source its IR had first picked up. The flare of the paper caught its electronic attention. The turret swung, then back. It was puzzled. It whooped again, then reached a decision.

Ports snapped open. A volley of anti-personnel slugs whoofed into the target; the scrap of paper disappeared in a gout of tossed dirt.

I hugged the ground like gold lame hugs a torch singer's hip and waited; nothing happened. The Bolo sat, rumbling softly to itself. Then I

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heard another sound over the murmur of the idling engine, a distant roaring, like a flight of low-level bombers. I raised my head half an inch and took a look. There were lights moving beyond the field — the paired beams of a convoy approaching from the town.

The Bolo stirred, moved heavily forward until it towered over me no more than twenty feet away. I saw gun ports open high on the armored facade — the ones that housed the heavy infinite repeaters. Slim black muzzles slid into view, hunted for an instant, then depressed and locked.

They were bearing on the oncoming vehicles that were spreading out now in a loose skirmish line under a roiling layer of dust. The watchdog was getting ready to defend its territory — and I was caught in the middle. A blue-white floodlight lanced out from across the field, glared against the scaled plating of the Bolo. I heard relays click inside the monster fighting machine, and braced myself for the thunder of her battery . . .

There was a dry rattle.

The guns traversed, clattering emptily. Beyond the fence the floodlight played for a moment longer against the Bolo, then moved on across the ramp, back, across and back, searching . . .

Once more the Bolo fired its empty guns. Its red IR beams swept the scene again; then relays snicked, the impotent guns retracted, the port covers closed.

Satisfied, the Bolo heaved itself around and moved off, trailing a stink of ozone and ether, the broken tread thumping like a cripple on a stair.

I waited until it disappeared in the gloom two hundred yards away, then cautiously turned my suit control to vent off the heat. Full insulation could boil a man in his own gravy in less than half an hour.

The floodlight had blinked off now. I got to my hands and knees and started toward the perimeter fence. The Bolo's circuits weren't tuned as fine as they should have been; it let me go.

There were men moving in the glare and dust, beyond the rusty lace-work that had once been a chain-link fence. They carried guns and stood in tight little groups, staring across toward the blockhouse.

I moved closer, keeping flat and avoiding the avenues of yellowish light thrown by the headlamps of the parked vehicles — halftracks, armored cars, a few light manned tanks.

There was nothing about the look of this crowd that impelled me to leap up and be welcomed. They wore green uniforms, and half of them sported beards. What the hell: had Castro landed in force?

I angled off to the right, away from the big main gate that had been manned day and night by guards with tommyguns. It hung now by one hinge from a scarred concrete post, under a cluster of dead polyarcs in corroded brackets. The big sign that had read GLENN AEROSPACE CENTER — AUTH-

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ORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY lay face down in hip-high underbrush.

More cars were coming up. There was a lot of talk and shouting; a squad of men formed and headed my way, keeping to the outside of the fallen fence.

I was outside the glare of the lights now. I chanced a run for it, got over the sagged wire and across a potholed blacktop road before they reached me. I crouched in the ditch and watched as the detail dropped men in pairs at fifty-yard intervals.

Another five minutes and they would have intercepted me — along with whatever else they were after.

I worked my way back across an empty lot and found a strip of lesser underbrush lined with shaggy trees, beneath which a patch of cracked sidewalk showed here and there.

Several things were beginning to be a little clearer now: The person who had pushed the button to bring me out of stasis hadn't been around to greet me, because no one pushed it. The automatics, triggered by some malfunction, had initiated the recovery cycle.

The system's self-contained power unit had been designed to maintain a star-ship crewman's minimal vital functions indefinitely, at reduced body temperature and metabolic rate. There was no way to tell exactly how long I had been in the tank. From the condition of the fence and the roads, it had been more than a matter of weeks — or even months.

Had it been a year . . . or more? I thought of Ginny and the boy, waiting at home — thinking the old man was dead, probably. I'd neglected them before for my work, but not like this . . .

Our house was six miles from the base, in the foothills on the other side of town. It was a long walk, the way I felt — but I had to get there.

II

Two hours later, I was clear of the town, following the river bank west.

I kept having the idea that someone was following me. But when I stopped to listen, there was never anything there; just the still, cold night, and the frogs, singing away patiently in the low ground to the south.

When the ground began to rise, I left the road and struck off across the open field. I reached a wide street, followed it in a curve that would bring me out at the foot of Ridge Avenue — my street. I could make out the shapes of low, rambling houses now.

It had been the kind of residential section the local Junior Chamber members had hoped to move into some day. Now the starlight that filtered through the cloud cover showed me broken windows, doors that sagged open, automobiles that squatted on flat, dead tires under collapsing car shelters — and here and there a blackened, weed-grown foundation, like a gap in a row of rotting teeth.

The neighborhood wasn't what it had been. How long had I been away? How long . . .?

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I fell down again, hard this time. It wasn't easy getting up. I seemed to weigh a hell of a lot for a guy who hadn't been eating regularly. My breathing was very fast and shallow now, and my skull was getting ready to split and give birth to a live alligator — the ill-tempered kind. It was only a few hundred yards more; but why the hell had I picked a place halfway up a hill?

I heard the sound again — a crackle of dry grass. I got the pistol out and stood flatfooted in the middle of the street, listening hard.

All I heard was my stomach growling. I took the pistol off cock and started off again, stopped suddenly a couple of times to catch him off-guard; nothing. I reached the corner of Ridge Avenue, started up the slope. Behind me, a stick popped loudly.

I picked that moment to fall down again. Heaped leaves saved me from another skinned knee. I rolled over against a low fieldstone wall and propped myself against it. I had to use both hands to cock the pistol. I stared into the dark, but all I could see were the little lights whirling again. The pistol got heavy; I put it down, concentrated on taking deep breaths and blinking away the fireflies.

I heard footsteps plainly, close by. I shook my head, accidentally banged it against the stone behind me. That helped. I saw him, not over twenty feet away, coming up the hill toward me, a black-haired man with a full beard, dressed in odds and ends of rags and furs, gripping a polished club with a leather thong.

I reached for the pistol, found only leaves, tried again, touched the gun and knocked it away. I was still groping when I heard a scuffle of feet. I swung around, saw a tall, wide figure with a mane of untrimmed hair.

He hit the bearded man like a pro tackle taking out the practice dummy. They went down together hard and rolled over in a flurry of dry leaves. The cats were fighting over the mouse; that was my signal to leave quietly.

I made one last grab for the gun, found it, got to my feet and staggered off up the grade that seemed as steep now as penthouse rent. And from down slope, I heard an engine gunned, the clash of a heavy transmission that needed adjustment. A spotlight flickered, made shadows dance.

I recognized a fancy wrought-iron fence fronting a vacant lot; that had been the Adams house. Only half a block to go — but I was losing my grip fast. I went down twice more, then gave up and started crawling. The lights were all around now, brighter than ever. My head split open, dropped off and rolled downhill.

A few more yards and I could let it all go. Ginny would put me in a warm bed, patch up my scratches, and feed me soup. Ginny would . . . Ginny . . .

I was lying with my mouth full of dead leaves. I heard running feet, yells. An engine idled noisily down the block.

I got my head up and found my-

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self looking at chipped brickwork and the heavy brass hinges from which my front gate had hung. The gate was gone and there was a large chunk of brick missing. Some delivery truck had missed his approach.

I got to my feet, took a couple of steps into deep shadow with feet that felt as though they'd been amputated and welded back on at the ankle. I stumbled, fetched up against something scaled over with rust. I held on, blinked and made out the seeping flank of my brand new '79 Pontiac. There was a crumbled crust of whitish glass lining the brightwork strip that had framed the rear window.

A fire . . .?

A footstep sounded behind me, and I suddenly remembered several things, none of them pleasant. I felt for my gun; it was gone. I moved back along the side of the car, tried to hold on.

No use. My arms were like unsuccessful pie crust. I slid down among dead leaves, sat listening to the steps coming closer. They stopped, and through a dense fog that had sprung up suddenly I caught a glimpse of a tall white-haired figure standing over me.

Then the fog closed in and swept everything away.

I lay on my back this time, looking across at the smoky yellow light of a thick brown candle guttering in the draft from a glassless window. In the center of the room, a few sticks of damp-looking wood heaped on the cracked asphalt tiles burned with a grayish flame. A thin curl of acrid smoke rose up to stir cobwebs festooned under ceiling beams from which wood veneer had peeled away. Light alloy truss-work showed beneath.

It was a strange scene, but not so strange that I didn't recognize it: it was my own living room — looking a little different than when I had seen it last. The odors were different, too; I picked out mildew, badly-cured leather, damp wool, tobacco . . .

I turned my head. A yard from the rags I lay on, the white-haired man, looking older than pharaoh, sat sleeping with his back against the wall.

The shotgun was gripped in one big, gnarled hand. His head was tilted back, blue-veined eyelids shut. I sat up, and at my movement his eyes opened.

He lay relaxed for a moment, as though life had to return from some place far away. Then he raised his head. His face was hollow and lined. His white hair was thin. A coarse-woven shirt hung loose across wide shoulders that had been Herculean once. But now Hercules was old, old. He looked at me expectantly.

"Who are you?" I said. "Why did you follow me? What happened to the house? Where's my family? Who owns the bully-boys in green?" My jaw hurt when I spoke. I put my hand up and felt it gingerly.

"You fell," the old man said, in a voice that rumbled like a subterranean volcano.

"The understatement of the year, Pop." I tried to get up. Nausea knotted my stomach.

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"You have to rest," the old man said, looking concerned. "Before the Baron's men come . . ." He paused, looking at me as though he expected me to say something profound.

"I want to know where the people are that live here!" My yell came out as weak as church-social punch. "A woman and a boy . . ."

He was shaking his head. "You have to do something quick. The soldiers will come back, search every house — "

I sat up, ignoring the little men driving spikes into my skull. "I don't give a damn about soldiers! Where's my family? What's happened?" I reached out and gripped his arm. "How long was I down there? What year is this?"

He only shook his head. "Come, eat some food. Then I can help you with your plan."

It was no use talking to the old man; he was senile.

I got off the cot. Except for the dizziness and a feeling that my knees were made of papier-mache, I was all right. I picked up the hand-formed candle, stumbled into the hall.

It was a jumble of rubbish. I climbed through, pushed open the door to my study. There was my desk, the tall bookcase with the glass doors, the gray rug, the easy chair. Aside from a layer of dust and some peeling wall paper, it looked normal. I flipped the switch. Nothing happened.

"What is that charm?" the old man said behind me. He pointed to the light switch.

"The power's off," I said. "Just habit."

He reached out and flipped the switch up, then down again. "It makes a pleasing sound."

"Yeah." I picked up a book from the desk; it fell apart in my hands.

I went back into the hall, tried the bedroom door, looked in at heaped leaves, the remains of broken furniture, an empty window frame. I went on to the end of the hall and opened the door to the bedroom.

Cold night wind blew through a barricade of broken timbers. The roof had fallen in, and a sixteen-inch tree trunk slanted through the wreckage. The old man stood behind me, watching.

"Where is she, damn you?" I leaned against the door frame to swear and fight off the faintness. "Where's my wife?"

The old man looked troubled. "Come, eat now . . . "

"Where is she? Where's the woman who lived here?"

He frowned, shook his head dumbly. I picked my way through the wreckage, stepped out into knee-high brush. A gust blew my candle out. In the dark I stared at my back yard, the crumbled pit that had been the barbecue grill, the tangled thickets that had been rose beds — and a weathered length of boards upended in the earth.

"What the hell's this . . .?" I fumbled out a permatch, lit my candle, leaned close and read the crude letters cut into the crumbling wood: VIRGINIA ANNE JACKSON. BORN JAN. 8 1957. KILL BY THE DOGS WINTER 1992.

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III

The Baron's men came twice in the next three days. Each time the old man carried me, swearing but too weak to argue, out to a lean-to of branches and canvas in the woods behind the house. Then he disappeared, to come back an hour or two later and haul me back to my rag bed by the fire.

Three times a day he gave me a tin pan of stew, and I ate it mechanically. My mind went over and over the picture of Ginny, living on for twelve years in the slowly decaying house, and then —

It was too much. There are some shocks the mind refuses.

I thought of the tree that had fallen and crushed the east wing. An elm that size was at least fifty to sixty years old — maybe older. And the only elm on the place had been a two-year sapling. I knew it well; I had planted it.

The date carved on the headboard was 1992. As nearly as I could judge another thirty-five years had passed since then at least. My shipmates — Banner, Day, Mallon — they were all dead, long ago. How had they died? The old man was too far gone to tell me anything useful. Most of my questions produced a shake of the head and a few rumbled words about charms, demons, spells, and the Baron.

"I don't believe in spells," I said. "And I'm not too sure I believe in this Baron. Who is he?"

"The Baron Trollmaster of Filly. He holds all this country — " the old man made a sweeping gesture with his arm — "all the way to Jersey."

"Why was he looking for me? What makes me important?"

"You came from the Forbidden Place. Everyone heard the cries of the Lesser Troll that stands guard over the treasure there. If the Baron can learn your secrets of power — "

"Troll, hell! That's nothing but a Bolo on automatic!"

"By any name every man dreads the monster. A man who walks in its shadow has much *mana*. But the others — the ones that run in a pack like dogs — would tear you to pieces for a demon if they could lay hands on you."

"You saw me back there. Why didn't you give me away? And why are you taking care of me now?"

He shook his head — the all-purpose answer to any question.

I tried another tack: "Who was the rag man you tackled just outside? Why was he laying for me?"

The old man snorted. "Tonight the dogs will eat him. But forget that. Now we have to talk about your plan — "

"I've got about as many plans as the senior boarder in Death Row. I don't know if you know it, Old Timer, but somebody slid the world out from under me while I wasn't looking."

The old man frowned. I had the thought that I wouldn't like to have him mad at me, for all his white hair . . .

He shook his head. "You must understand what I tell you. The soldiers of the Baron will find

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you some day. If you are to break the spell — "

"Break the spell, eh?" I snorted. I think I get the idea, Pop. You've got it in your head that I'm a valuable property of some kind. You figure I can use my supernatural powers to take over this menagerie —and you'll be in on the ground floor. Well, listen, you old idiot! I spent sixty years — maybe more — in a stasis tank two hundred feet underground. My world died while I was down there. This Baron of yours seems to own everything now. If you think I'm going to get myself shot bucking him, forget it!"

The old man didn't say anything.

"Things don't seem to be broken up much," I went on. "It must have been gas, or germ warfare — or fallout. Damn few people around. You're still able to live on what you can loot from stores; automobiles are still sitting where they were the day the world ended. How old were you when it happened, Pop? The war, I mean. Do you remember it?"

He shook his head. "The world has always been as it is now. "

"What year were you born?"

He scratched at his white hair. "I knew the number once. But I've forgotten.

"I guess the only way I'll find out how long I was gone is to saw that damned elm in two and count the rings — but even that wouldn't help much; I don't know when it blew over. Never mind. The important thing now is to talk to this Baron of yours. Where does he stay?"

The old man shook his head violently. "If the Baron lays his hands on you, he'll wring the secrets from you on the rack! I know his ways. For five years I was a slave in the Palace Stables."

"If you think I'm going to spend the rest of my days in this rat nest, you got another guess on the house! This Baron has tanks, an army. He's kept a little technology alive. That's the outfit for me — not this garbage detail! Now, where's this place of his located?"

"The guards will shoot you on sight like a pack-dog!"

"There has to be a way to get to him, old man! Think!"

The old head was shaking again. "He fears assassination. You can never approach him . . ." He brightened. "Unless you know a spell of power?"

I chewed my lip. "Maybe I do at that. You wanted me to have a plan. I think I feel one coming on. Have you got a map?"

He pointed to the desk beside me. I tried the drawers, found mice, roaches, moldy money — and a stack of folded maps. I opened one carefully; faded ink on yellowed paper, falling apart at the creases. The legend in the corner read: "PENNSYLVANIA 40M:1. Copyright 1970 by ESSO Corporation."

"This will do, Pop," I said. "Now, tell me all you can about this Baron of yours."

"You'll destroy him?"

"I haven't even met the man."

"He is evil."

"I don't know; he owns an army. That makes up for a lot . . . "

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After three more days of rest and the old man's stew, I was back to normal — or near enough. I had the old man boil me a tub of water for a bath and a shave. I found a serviceable pair of synthetic fiber long-johns in a chest of drawers, pulled them on and zipped the weather suit over them, then buckled on the holster I had made from a tough plastic.

"That completes my preparations, Pop," I said. "It'll be dark in another half hour. Thanks for everything."

He got to his feet, a worried look on his lined face, like a father the first time Junior asks for the car.

"The Baron's men are everywhere."

"If you want to help, come along and back me up with that shotgun of yours." I picked it up. "Have you got any shells for this thing?"

He smiled, pleased now. "There are shells — but the magic is gone from many."

"That's the way magic is, Pop. It goes out of things before you notice."

"Will you destroy the Great Troll now?"

"My motto is let sleeping trolls lie. I'm just paying a social call on the Baron."

The joy ran out of his face like booze from a dropped jug.

"Don't take it so hard, Old Timer. I'm not the fairy prince you were expecting. But I'll take care of you —if I make it."

I waited while he pulled on a moth-eaten mackinaw. He took the shotgun and checked the breech, then looked at me.

"I'm ready," he said.

"Yeah," I said. "Let's go . . ."

The Baronial palace was a forty-story slab of concrete and glass that had been known in my days as the Hilton Garden East. We made it in three hours of groping across country in the dark, at the end of which I was puffing but still on my feet. We moved out from the cover of the trees and looked across a dip in the ground at the lights, incongruously cheerful in the ravaged valley.

"The gates are there — " the old man pointed — "guarded by the Great Troll."

"Wait a minute. I thought the Troll was the Bolo back at the Site."

"That's the Lesser Troll. This is the Great One."

I selected a few choice words and muttered them to myself. "It would have saved us some effort if you'd mentioned this Troll a little sooner, Old Timer. I'm afraid I don't have any spells that will knock out a Mark II, once it's got its dander up."

He shook his head. "It lies under enchantment. I remember the day when it came, throwing thunderbolts. Many men were killed. Then the Baron commanded it to stand at his gates to guard him."

"How long ago was this, Old Timer?"

He worked his lips over the question. "Long ago," he said finally. "Many winters."

"Let's go take a look."

We picked our way down the

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slope, came up along a rutted dirt road to the dark line of trees that rimmed the palace grounds. The old man touched my arm.

"Softly here. Maybe the Troll sleeps lightly . . ."

I went the last few yards, eased around a brick column with a dead lantern on top, stared across fifty yards of waist-high brush at a dark silhouette outlined against the palace lights.

Cables, stretched from trees outside the circle of weeds, supported a weathered tarp which drooped over the Bolo. The wreckage of a helicopter lay like a crumpled dragonfly at the far side of the ring. Nearer, fragments of a heavy car chassis lay scattered. The old man hovered at my shoulder.

"It looks as though the gate is off limits," I hissed. "Let's try farther along."

He nodded. "No one passes here. There is a second gate, there." He pointed. "But there are guards."

"Let's climb the wall between gates."

"There are sharp spikes on top the wall. But I know a place, farther on, where the spikes have been blunted."

"Lead on, Pop."

Half an hour of creeping through wet brush brought us to the spot we were looking for. It looked to me like any other stretch of eight-foot masonry wall overhung with wet poplar trees.

"I'll go first," the old man said, "to draw the attention of the guard."

"Then who's going to boost me up? I'll go first."

He nodded, cupped his hands and lifted me as easily as a sailor lifting a beer glass. Pop was old—but he was nobody's softie.

I looked around, then crawled up, worked my way over the corroded spikes, dropped down on the lawn.

Immediately I heard a crackle of brush. A man stood up not ten feet away. I lay flat in the dark trying to look like something that had been there a long time . . .

I heard another sound, a thump and a crashing of brush. The man before me turned, disappeared in the darkness. I heard him beating his way through shrubbery; then he called out, got an answering shout from the distance.

I didn't loiter. I got to my feet and made a sprint for the cover of the trees along the drive.

IV

Flat on the wet ground, under the wind-whipped branches of an ornamental cedar, I blinked the fine misty rain from my eyes, waiting for the half-hearted alarm behind me to die down.

There were a few shouts, some sounds of searching among the shrubbery. It was a bad night to be chasing imaginary intruders in the Baronial grounds. In five minutes, all was quiet again.

I studied the view before me. The tree under which I lay was one of a row lining a drive. It swung in a graceful curve, across a smooth half-mile of dark lawn, to the tower of light that was the Palace of the

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Baron of Filly. The silhouetted figures of guards and late-arriving guests moved against the gleam from the collonaded entrance. On a terrace high above, dancers twirled under colored lights. The faint glow of the repellor field kept the cold rain at a distance. In a lull in the wind, I heard music, faintly. The Baron's weekly Grand Ball was in full swing.

I saw shadows move across the wet gravel before me, then heard the purr of an engine. I hugged the ground and watched a long svelte Mercedes—about a '68 model, I estimated—barrel past.

The mob in the city ran in packs like dogs, but the Baron's friends did a little better for themselves.

I got to my feet and moved off toward the palace, keeping well in the shadows. When the drive swung to the right to curve across in front of the building, I left it, went to hands and knees and followed a trimmed privet hedge, past dark rectangles of formal garden to the edge of a secondary pond of light from the garages. I let myself down on my belly and watched the shadows that moved on the graveled drive.

There seemed to be two men on duty — no more. Waiting around wouldn't improve my chances. I got to my feet, stepped out into the drive and walked openly around the corner of the gray fieldstone building into the light.

A short, thickset man in greasy Baronial green looked at me incuriously. My weather suit looked enough like ordinary coveralls to get me by—at least for a few minutes. A second man, tilted back against the wall in a wooden chair, didn't even turn his head.

"Hey!" I called. "You birds got a three-ton jack I can borrow?"

Shorty looked me over sourly. "Who you drive for, Mac?"

"The High Duke of Jersey. Flat. Left rear. On a night like this. Some luck."

"The Jersey can't afford a jack?"

I stepped over the short man, prodded him with a forefinger. "He could buy you and gut you on the altar any Saturday night of the week, low-pockets. And he'd get a kick out of doing it. He's like that."

"Can't a guy crack a harmless joke without somebody talks about altar-bait? You wanna jack, take a jack."

The man in the chair opened one eye and looked me over. "How long you on the Jersey payroll?" he growled.

"Long enough to know who handles the rank between Jersey and Filly." I yawned, looked around the wide, cement floored garage, glanced over the four heavy cars with the Filly crest on their sides.

"Where's the kitchen? I'm putting a couple of hot coffees under my belt before I go back out into that."

"Over there. A flight up and to your left. Tell the cook Pintsy invited you."

"I tell him Jersey sent me, low-pockets." I moved off in a dead silence, opened the door and stepped up into spicy-scented warmth.

A deep carpet—even here—muffled my footsteps. I could hear the

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clash of pots and crockery from the kitchen a hundred feet distant along the hallway. I went along to a deep-set doorway ten feet from the kitchen, tried the knob and looked into a dark room. I pushed the door shut and leaned against it, watching the kitchen. Through the woodwork I could feel the thump of the bass notes from the orchestra blasting away three flights up. The odors of food—roast fowl, baked ham, grilled horsemeat—curled under the kitchen door and wafted under my nose. I pulled my belt up a notch and tried to swallow the dryness in my throat. The old man had fed me a half a gallon of stew, before we left home, but I was already working up a fresh appetite.

Five slow minutes passed. Then the the kitchen door swung open and a tall round-shouldered fellow with a shiny bald scalp stepped into view, a tray balanced on the spread fingers of one hand. He turned, the black tails of his cutaway swirling, called something behind him and started past me. I stepped out, clearing my throat. He shied, whirled to face me. He was good at his job: The two dozen tiny glasses on the tray stood fast. He blinked, got an indignant remark ready—

I showed him the knife the old man had lent me—a bone-handled job with a six-inch switch-blade. "Make a sound and I'll cut your throat," I said softly. "Put the tray on the floor."

He started to back. I brought the knife up. He took a good look, licked his lips, crouched quickly and put the tray down.

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"Turn around.

I stepped in and chopped him at the base of the neck with the edge of my hand. He folded like a two-dollar umbrella.

I wrestled the door open and dumped him inside, paused a moment to listen. All quiet. I worked his black coat and trousers off, unhooked the stiff white dickey and tie. He snored softly. I pulled the clothes on over the weather suit. They were a fair fit. By the light of my pencil flash, I cut down a heavy braided cord hanging by a high window, used it to truss the waiter's hands and feet together behind him. There was a small closet opening off the room. I put him in it, closed the door and stepped back into the hall. Still quiet. I tried one of the drinks. It wasn't bad.

I took another, then picked up the tray and followed the sounds of music.

The grand ballroom was a hundred yards long, fifty wide, with walls of rose, gold and white, banks of high windows hung with crimson velvet, a vaulted ceiling decorated with cherubs and a polished acre of floor on which gaudily gowned and uniformed couples moved in time to the heavy beat of the traditional fox-trot. I moved slowly along the edge of the crowd, looking for the Baron.

A hand caught my arm and hauled me around. A glass fell off my tray, smashed on the floor.

A dapper little man in black and white headwaiter's uniform glared up at me.

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"What do you think you're doing, cretin?" he hissed. "That's the genuine ancient stock you're slopping on the floor." I looked around quickly; no one else seemed to be paying any attention.

"Where are you from?" he snapped. I opened my mouth—

"Never mind, you're all the same." He waggled his hands disgustedly. "The field-hands they send me—a disgrace to the Black. Now, you! Stand up! Hold your tray proudly, gracefully! Step along daintily, not like a knight taking the field! And pause occasionally — just on the chance that some noble guest might wish to drink."

"You bet, pal," I said. I moved on, paying a little more attention to my waiting. I saw plenty of green uniforms; pea green, forest green, emerald green—but they were all hung with braid and medals. According to Pop, the Baron affected a spartan simplicity. The diffidence of absolute power.

There were high white and gold doors every few yards along the side of the ballroom. I spotted one standing open and sidled toward it. It wouldn't hurt to reconnoiter the area.

Just beyond the door, a very large sentry in a bottle-green uniform almost buried under gold braid moved in front of me. He was dressed like a toy soldier, but there was nothing playful about the way he snapped his power gun to the ready. I winked at him.

"Thought you boys might want a drink," I hissed. "Good stuff."

He looked at the tray, licked his lips. "Get back in there, you fool," he growled. "You'll get us both hung."

"Suit yourself, pal." I backed out. Just before the door closed between us, he lifted a glass off the tray.

I turned, almost collided with a long lean cookie in a powder-blue outfit complete with dress sabre, gold frogs, leopard-skin facings, a pair of knee-length white gloves looped under an epaulette, a pistol in a fancy holster and an eighteen-inch swagger stick. He gave me the kind of look old maids give sin.

"Look where you're going, swine," he said in a voice like a pine board splitting.

"Have a drink, Admiral," I suggested.

He lifted his upper lip to show me a row of teeth that hadn't had their annual trip to the dentist lately. The ridges along each side of his mouth turned greenish white. He snatched for the gloves on his shoulder, fumbled them; they slapped the floor beside me.

"I'd pick those up for you, Boss," I said, "But I've got my tray . . . "

He drew a breath between his teeth, chewed it into strips and snorted it back at me, then snapped his fingers and pointed with his stick toward the door behind me.

"Through there, instantly!" It didn't seem like the time to argue; I pulled it open and stepped through.

The guard in green ducked his glass and snapped to attention when he saw the baby-blue outfit. My new friend ignored him, made a curt gesture to me. I got the idea, trailed along the wide, high, gloomy cor-

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ridor to a small door, pushed through it into a well-lit tile-walled latrine. A big-eyed slave in white ducks stared.

Blue-boy jerked his head. "Get out!" The slave scuttled away. Blue-boy turned to me.

"Strip off your jacket, slave! Your owner has neglected to teach you discipline."

I looked around quickly, saw that we were alone.

"Wait a minute while I put the tray down, corporal," I said. "We don't want to waste any of the good stuff." I turned to put the tray on a soiled linen bin, caught a glimpse of motion in the mirror.

I ducked, and the nasty-looking little leather quirt whistled past my ear, slammed against the edge of a marble-topped lavatory with a crack like a pistol shot. I dropped the tray, stepped in fast and threw a left to Blue-boy's jaw that bounced his head against the tiled wall. I followed up with a right to the belt buckle, then held him up as he bent over, gagging, and hit him hard under the ear.

I hauled him into a booth, propped him up and started shedding the waiter's blacks.

V

I left him on the floor wearing my old suit, and stepped out into the hall.

I liked the feel of his pistol at my hip. It was an old fashioned .38, the same model I favored. The blue uniform was a good fit, what with the weight I'd lost. Blue-boy and I had something in common after all.

The latrine attendant goggled at me. I grimaced like a quadruple amputee trying to scratch his nose and jerked my head toward the door I had come out of. I hoped the gesture would look familiar.

"Truss that mad dog and throw him outside the gates," I snarled. I stamped off down the corridor, trying to look mad enough to discourage curiosity.

Apparently it worked. Nobody yelled for the cops.

I reentered the ballroom by another door, snagged a drink off a passing tray, checked over the crowd. I saw two more powder-blue get-ups, so I wasn't unique enough to draw special attention. I made a mental note to stay well away from my comrades in blue. I blended with the landscape, chatting and nodding and not neglecting my drinking, working my way toward a big arched doorway on the other side of the room that looked like the kind of entrance the head man might use. I didn't want to meet him. Not yet. I just wanted to get him located before I went any further.

A passing wine slave poured a full inch of the genuine ancient stock into my glass, ducked his head and moved on. I gulped it like sour bar whiskey. My attention was elsewhere.

A flurry of activity near the big door indicated that maybe my guess had been accurate. Potbellied officials were forming up in a sort of reception line near the big double door. I started to drift back into the rear rank, bumped against a fat man in medals and a sash who glared, fingered a monocle with a plump ring-

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studded hand and said, "Suggest you take your place, Colonel," in a suety voice.

I must have looked doubtful, because he bumped me with his paunch, and growled, "Foot of the line! Next to the Equerry, you idiot." He elbowed me aside and waddled past.

I took a step after him, reached out with my left foot and hooked his shiny black boot. He leaped forward, off balance, medals jangling. I did a fast fade while he was still groping for his monocle, eased into a spot at the end of the line.

The conversation died away to a nervous murmur. The doors swung back and a pair of guards with more trimmings than a phoney stock certificate stamped into view wheeled to face each other and presented arms —chrome-plated automatic rifles, in this case. A dark-faced man with thinning gray hair, a pug nose and a trimmed gray van Dyke came into view, limping slightly from a stiffish knee.

His unornamented gray outfit made him as conspicuous in this gathering as a crane among peacocks. He nodded perfunctorily to left and right, coming along between the waiting rows of flunkeys, who snapped-to as he came abreast, wilted and let out sighs behind him. I studied him closely. He was fifty, give or take the age of a bottle of second-rate bourbon, with the weather-beaten complexion of a former outdoor man and the same look of alertness grown bored that a rattlesnake farmer develops—just before the fatal bite.

He looked up and caught my eye on him, and for a moment I thought he was about to speak. Then he went on past.

At the end of the line, he turned abruptly and spoke to a man who hurried away. Then he engaged in conversation with a cluster of head-bobbing guests.

I spent the next fifteen minutes casually getting closer to the door nearest the one the Baron had entered by. I looked around; nobody was paying any attention to me. I stepped past a guard who presented arms. The door closed softly, cutting off the buzz of talk and the worst of the music.

I went along to the end of the corridor. From the transverse hall, a grand staircase rose in a sweep of bright chrome and pale wood. I didn't know where it led, but it looked right. I headed for it, moving along briskly like a man with important business in mind and no time for light chit-chat.

Two flights up, in a wide corridor of muted lights, deep carpets, brocaded wall hangings, mirrors, urns, and an odor of expensive tobacco and *coeur de russe*, a small man in black bustled from a side corridor. He saw me. He opened his mouth, closed it, half turned away, then swung back to face me. I recognized him; he was the head-waiter who had pointed out the flaws in my waiting style half an hour earlier.

"Here," he started—

I chopped him short with a roar of what I hoped was authentic upper-crust rage.

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"Direct me to his Excellency's apartments, scum! And thank your guardian imp I'm in too great haste to cane you for the insolent look about you!"

He went pale, gulped hard and pointed. I snorted and stamped past him down the turning he had indicated.

This was Baronial country, all right. A pair of guards stood at the far end of the corridor.

I'd passed half a dozen with no more than a click of heels to indicate they saw me. These two shouldn't be any different—and it wouldn't look good if I turned and started back at sight of them. The first rule of the gate-crasher is to look as if you belong where you are.

I headed in their direction.

When I was fifty feet from them, they both shifted rifles—not to present-arms position, but at the ready. The nickle-plated bayonets were aimed right at me. It was no time for me to look doubtful; I kept on coming. At twenty feet, I heard their rifle bolts snick home. I could see the expressions on their faces now; they looked as nervous as a couple of teen-age sailors on their first visit to a joy-house.

"Point those butter knives into the corner, you banana-fingered cotton choppers!" I said, looking bored and didn't waver. I unlimbered my swagger stick and slapped my gloved hand with it, letting them think it over. The gun muzzles dropped—just slightly. I followed up fast.

"Which is the anteroom to the Baron's apartments?" I demanded.

"Uh . . . this here is his Excellency's apartments, sir, but—"

"Never mind the lecture, you milk-faced fool," I cut in. "Do you think I'd be here if it weren't? Which is the anteroom, damn you!"

"We got orders, sir, Nobody's to come closer than that last door back there."

"We got orders to shoot," the other interrupted. He was a little older—maybe twenty-two. I turned on him.

"I'm waiting for an answer to a question!"

"Sir, the Articles—"

I narrowed my eyes. "I think you'll find paragraph Two B covers Special Cosmic Top Secret Couriers. When you go off duty, report yourselves on punishment. Now, the anteroom! And be quick about it!"

The bayonets were sagging now. The younger of the two licked his lips. "Sir, we never been inside. We don't know how it's laid out in there. If the colonel wants to just take a look . . . "

The other guard opened his mouth to say something. I didn't wait to find out what it was. I stepped between them, muttering something about bloody recruits and important messages, and worked the fancy handle on the big gold and white door. I paused to give the two sentries a hard look.

"I hope I don't have to remind you that any mention of the movements of a Cosmic Courier is punishable by slow death. Just forget you ever saw me." I went on in and closed the door without waiting to catch the reaction to that one.

The Baron had done well by him-

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self in the matter of decor. The room I was in—a sort of lounge-cum-bar—was paved in two-inch-deep nylon fuzz, the color of a fog at sea, that foamed up at the edges against walls of pale blue brocade with tiny yellow flowers. The bar was a teak log split down the middle and—polished. The glasses sitting on it were like tissue paper engraved with patterns of nymphs and satyrs. Subdued light came from somewhere, along with a faint melody that seemed to speak of youth, long ago.

I went on into the next room. I found more soft light, the glow of hand-rubbed rare woods, rich fabrics and wide windows with a view of dark night sky. The music was coming from a long, low, built-in speaker with a lamp, a heavy crystal ashtray and a display of hothouse roses. There was a scent in the air. Not the *coeur de Russe* and Havana leaf I'd smelled in the hall, but a subtler perfume.

I turned and looked into the eyes of a girl with long black lashes. Smooth black hair came down to bare shoulders. An arm as smooth and white as whipped cream was draped over a chair back, the hand holding an eight-inch cigarette holder and sporting a diamond as inconspicuous as a chrome-plated hubcap.

"You must want something pretty badly," she murmured, batting her eyelashes at me. I could feel the breeze at ten feet. I nodded. Under the circumstances, that was about the best I could do.

"What could it be," she mused, "that's worth being shot for?" Her voice was like the rest of her: smooth, polished and relaxed—and with plenty of moxie held in reserve. She smiled casually, drew on her cigarette, tapped ashes onto the rug.

"Something bothering you, Colonel?" she inquired. "You don't seem talkative."

"I'll do my talking when the Baron arrives," I said.

"In that case, Jackson," said a husky voice behind me, "you can start any time you like."

I held my hands clear of my body and turned around slowly—just in case there was a nervous gun aimed at my spine. The Baron was standing near the door, unarmed, relaxed. There were no guards in sight The girl looked mildly amused. I put my hand on the pistol butt.

"How do you know my name?" I asked.

The Baron waved toward a chair. "Sit down, Jackson," he said, almost gently. "You've had a tough time of it—but you're all right now." He walked past me to the bar, poured out two glasses, turned and offered me one. I felt a little silly standing there fingering the gun; I went over and took the drink.

"To the old days." The Baron raised his glass.

I drank. It was the genuine ancient stock, all right. "I asked you how you knew my name," I said.

"That's easy. I used to know you."

He smiled faintly. There was something about his face . . .

"You look well in the uniform of the Penn-dragoons," he said. "Better than you ever did in Aerospace blue."

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"Good God!" I said. "Toby Mallon!"

He ran a hand over his bald head. "A little less hair on top, plus a beard as compensation, a few wrinkles, a slight pot. Oh, I've changed, Jackson."

"I had it figured as close to eighty years," I said. "The trees, the condition of the buildings—"

"Not far off the mark. Seventy-eight years this spring."

"You're a well-preserved hundred and ten, Toby."

He shook his head. "You weren't the only one in the tanks. But you had a better unit than I did. Mine gave out twenty years ago."

"You mean—you walked into this cold—just like I did?"

He nodded. "I know how you feel. Rip Van Winkle had nothing on us."

"Just one question, Toby. The men you sent out to pick me up seemed more interested in shooting than talking. I'm wondering why."

Mallon threw out his hands, "A little misunderstanding, Jackson. You made it; that's all that counts. Now that you're here, we've got some planning to do together. I've had it tough these last twenty years. I started off with nothing: a few hundred scavengers living in the ruins, hiding out every time Jersey or Dee-Cee raided for supplies. I built an organization, started a systematic salvage operation. I saved everything the rats and the weather hadn't gotten to, spruced up my palace here and stocked it. It's a rich province, Jackson—"

"And now you own it all. Not bad, Toby."

"They say knowledge is power. I had the knowledge."

I finished my drink and put the glass on the bar.

"What's this planning you say we have to do?"

Mallon leaned back on one elbow.

"Jackson, it's been a long haul—alone. It's good to see an old shipmate. But we'll dine first."

"I might manage to nibble a little something. Say a horse, roasted whole. Don't bother to remove the saddle."

He laughed. "First we eat," he said. "Then we conquer the world."

VI

I squeezed the last drop from the Beaujolais bottle and watched the girl whose name was Renada, hold a light for the cigar Mallon had taken from a silver box. My blue mess jacket and holster hung over the back of the chair. Everything was cosy now.

"Time for business, Jackson," Mallon said. He blew out smoke and looked at me through it. "How did things look—inside."

"Dusty. But intact, below ground level. Upstairs, there's blast damage and weathering. I don't suppose it's changed much since you came out twenty years ago. As far as I could tell, the Primary Site is okay."

Mallon leaned forward. "Now, you made it out past the Bolo. How did it handle itself? Still fully functional?"

I sipped my wine, thinking over my answer, remembering the Bolo's empty guns . . .

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"It damn near gunned me down. It's getting a little old and it can't see as well as it used to, but it's still a tough baby."

Mallon swore suddenly. "It was Mackenzie's idea. A last-minute move when the tech crews had to evacuate. It was a dusting job, you know."

"I hadn't heard. How did you find out all this?"

Mallon shot me a sharp look. "There were still a few people around who'd been in it. But never mind that. What about the Supply Site? That's what we're interested in. Fuel, guns, even some nuclear stuff. Heavy equipment; there's a couple more Bolos, moth-balled, I understand. Maybe we'll even find one or two of the Colossus missiles still in their silos. I made an air recon a few years back before my chopper broke down—"

"I think two silo doors are still in place. But why the interest in armament?"

Mallon snorted. "You've got a few things to learn about the setup, Jackson. I need that stuff. If I hadn't lucked into a stock of weapons and ammo in the armory cellar, Jersey would be wearing the spurs in my palace right now!"

I drew on my cigar and let the silence stretch out.

"You said something about conquering the world, Toby. I don't suppose by any chance you meant that literally?"

Mallon stood up, his closed fists working like a man crumpling unpaid bills. "They all want what I've got! They're all waiting." He walked across the room, back. "I'm ready to move against them now! I can put four thousand trained men in the field—"

"Let's get a couple of things straight, Mallon," I cut in. "You've got the natives fooled with this Baron routine. But don't try it on me. Maybe it was even necessary once; maybe there's an excuse for some of the stories I've heard. That's over now. I'm not interested in tribal warfare or gang rumbles. I need—"

"Better remember who's running things here, Jackson!" Mallon snapped. "It's not what you need that counts." He took another turn up and down the room, then stopped, facing me.

"Look, Jackson. I know how to get around in this jungle; you don't. If I hadn't spotted you and given some orders, you'd have been gunned down before you'd gone ten feet past the ballroom door."

"Why'd you let me in? I might've been gunning for you."

"You wanted to see the Baron alone. That suited me, too. If word got out — " He broke off, cleared his throat. "Let's stop wrangling, Jackson. We can't move until the Bolo guarding the site has been neutralized. There's only one way to do that: knock it out! And the only thing that can knock out a Bolo is another Bolo."

"So?"

"I've got another Bolo, Jackson. It's been covered, maintained. It can go up against the Troll—" he broke off, laughed shortly. "That's what the mob called it."

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"You could have done that years ago. Where do I come in?"

"You're checked out on a Bolo, Jackson. You know something about this kind of equipment."

"Sure. So do you."

"I never learned," he said shortly.

"Who's kidding who, Mallon? We all took the same orientation course less than a month ago—"

"For me it's been a long month. Let's just say I've forgotten."

"You parked that Bolo at your front gate and then forgot how you did it, eh?"

"Nonsense. It's always been there."

I shook my head. "I know different."

Mallon looked wary. "Where'd you get that idea?"

"Somebody told me."

Mallon ground his cigar out savagely on the damask cloth. "You'll point the scum out to me!"

"I don't give a damn whether you moved it or not. Anybody with your training can figure out the controls of a Bolo in half an hour—"

"Not well enough to take on the Tr— another Bolo."

I took a cigar from the silver box, picked up the lighter from the table, turned the cigar in the flame. Suddenly it was very quiet in the room.

I looked across at Mallon. He held out his hand.

"I'll take that," he said shortly.

I blew out smoke, squinted through it at Mallon. He sat with his hand out, waiting. I looked down at the lighter.

It was a heavy windproof model, with embossed Aerospace wings. I turned it over. Engraved letters read: *Lieut. Commander Don G. Banner, USAF.* I looked up. Renada sat quietly, holding my pistol trained dead on my belt buckle.

"I'm sorry you saw that," Mallon said. "It could cause misunderstandings."

"Where's Banner?"

"He . . . died. I told you—"

"You told me a lot of things, Toby. Some of them might even be true. Did you make him the same offer you've made me?"

Mallon darted a look at Renada. She sat holding the pistol, looking at me distantly, without expression.

"You've got the wrong idea, Jackson—" Mallon started.

"You and he came out about the same time I said. "Or maybe you got the jump on him by a few days. It must have been close; otherwise you'd never have taken him. Don was a sharp boy."

"You're out of your mind!" Mallon snapped. "Why, Banner was my friend!"

"Then why do you get nervous when I find his lighter on your table? There could be ten perfectly harmless explanations."

"I don't make explanations," Mallon said flatly.

"That attitude is hardly the basis for a lasting partnership, Toby. I have an unhappy feeling there's something you're not telling me."

Mallon pulled himself up in the chair. "Look here, Jackson. We've no reason to fall out. There's plenty for both of us—and one day I'll be

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needing a successor. It was too bad about Banner, but that's ancient history now. Forget it. I want you with me, Jackson! Together we can rule the Atlantic seaboard — or even more!"

I drew on my cigar, looking at the gun in Renada's hand. "You hold the aces, Toby. Shooting me would be no trick at all."

"There's no trick involved, Jackson!" Mallon snapped. "After all," he went on, almost wheedling now, "we're old friends. I want to give you a break, share with you—"

"I don't think I'd trust him if I were you, Mr. Jackson," Renada's quiet voice cut in. I looked at her. She looked back calmly. "You're more important to him than you think."

"That's enough, Renada," Mallon barked. "Go to your room at once."

"Not just yet, Toby," she said. "I'm also curious about how Commander Banner died." I looked at the gun in her hand.

It wasn't pointed at me now. It was aimed at Mallon's chest.

Mallon sat sunk deep in his chair, looking at me with eyes like a python with a bellyache. "You're fools, both of you," he grated. "I gave you everything, Renada. I raised you like my own daughter. And you, Jackson. You could have shared with me—all of it."

"I don't need a share of your delusions, Toby. I've got a set of my own. But before we go any farther, let's clear up a few points. Why haven't you been getting any mileage out of your tame Bolo? And what makes me important in the picture?"

"He's afraid of the Bolo machine," Renada said. "There's a spell on it which prevents men from approaching—even the Baron."

"Shut your mouth, you fool!" Mallon choked on his fury. I tossed the lighter in my hand and felt a smile twitching at my mouth.

"So Don was too smart for you after all. He must have been the one who had control of the Bolo. I suppose you called for a truce, and then shot him out from under the white flag. But he fooled you. He plugged a command into the Bolo's circuits to fire on anyone who came close—unless he was Banner."

"You're crazy!"

"It's close enough. You can't get near the Bolo. Right? And after twenty years, the bluff you've been running on the other Barons with your private troll must be getting a little thin. Any day now, one of them may decide to try you."

Mallon twisted his face in what may have been an attempt at a placating smile. "I won't argue with you, Jackson. You're right about the command circuit. Banner set it up to fire an anti-personnel blast at anyone coming within fifty yards. He did it to keep the mob from tampering with the machine. But there's a loophole. It wasn't only Banner who could get close. He set it up to accept any of the *Prometheus* crew—except me. He hated me. It was a trick to try to get me killed."

"So you're figuring I'll step in and de-fuse her for you, eh, Toby? Well, I'm sorry as hell to disap-

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point you, but somehow in the confusion I left my electro pass behind."

Mallon leaned toward me. "I told you we need each other, Jackson: I've got your pass. Yours and all the others. Renada, hand me my black box." She rose and moved across to the desk, holding the gun on Mallon—and on me, too, for that matter.

"Where'd you get my pass, Mallon?"

"Where do you think? They're the duplicates from the vault in the old command block. I knew one day one of you would come out. I'll tell you, Jackson, it's been hell, waiting all these years—and hoping. I gave orders that any time the Great Troll bellowed, the mob was to form up and stop anybody who came out. I don't know how you got through them . . . "

"I was too slippery for them. Besides," I added, "I met a friend."

"A friend? Who's that?"

"An old man who thought I was Prince Charming, come to wake everybody up. He was nuts. But he got me through."

Renada came back, handed me a square steel box. "Let's have the key, Mallon," I said. He handed it over. I opened the box, sorted through half a dozen silver-dollar-sized ovals of clear plastic, lifted one out.

"Is it a magical charm?" Renada asked, sounding awed. She didn't seem so sophisticated now—but I liked her better human.

"Just a synthetic crystalline plastic, designed to resonate to a pattern peculiar to my E.E.G." I said. "It amplifies the signal and gives off a characteristic emission that the Psychotronic circuit in the Bolo picks up."

"That's what I thought. Magic."

"Call it magic, then, kid." I dropped the electropass in my pocket, stood and looked at Renada. "I don't doubt that you know how to use that gun, honey, but I'm leaving now. Try not to shoot me."

"You're a fool if you try it," Mallon barked. "If Renada doesn't shoot you, my guards will. And even if you made it, you'd still need me!"

"I'm touched by your concern, Toby. Just why do I need you?"

"You wouldn't get past the first sentry post without help, Jackson. These people know me as the Trollmaster. They're in awe of me—of my *Mana*. But together—we can get to the controls of the Bolo, then use it to knock out the sentry machine at the Site—"

"Then what? With an operating Bolo I don't need anything else. Better improve the picture, Toby. I'm not impressed."

He wet his lips.

"It's *Prometheus*, do you understand? She's stocked with everything from Browning needlers to Norge stunners. Tools, weapons, instruments. And the power plants alone."

"I don't need needlers if I own a Bolo, Toby."

Mallon used some profanity. "You'll leave your liver and lights on the palace altar, Jackson. I promise you that!"

"Tell him what he wants to know, Toby," Renada said. Mallon nar-

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rowed his eyes at her. "You'll live to regret this, Renada."

"Maybe I will, Toby. But you taught me how to handle a gun—and to play cards for keeps."

The flush faded out of his face and left it pale. "All right, Jackson," he said, almost in a whisper. "It's not only the equipment. It's . . . the men."

I heard a clock ticking somewhere.

"What men, Toby?" I said softly.

"The crew. Day, Macy, the others. They're still in there, Jackson—aboard the ship, in stasis. We were trying to get the ship off when the attack came. There was forty minutes' warning. Everything was ready to go. You were on a test run; there wasn't time to cycle you out . . . "

"Keep talking," I rapped.

"You know how the system was set up; it was to be a ten-year run out, with an automatic turnaround at the end of that time if Alpha Centauri wasn't within a milliparsec." He snorted. "It wasn't. After twenty years, the instruments checked. They were satisfied. There was a planetary mass within the acceptable range. So they brought me out." He snorted again. "The longest dry run in history. I unstrapped and came out to see what was going on. It took me a little while to realize what had happened. I went back in and cycled Banner and Mackenzie out. We went into the town; you know what we found. I saw what we had to do, but Banner and Mac argued. The fools wanted to reseal *Prometheus* and proceed with the launch. For what? So we could spend the rest of our lives squatting in the ruins, when by stripping the ship we could make ourselves kings?"

"So there was an argument?" I prompted.

"I had a gun. I hit Mackenzie in the leg, I think—but they got clear, found a car and beat me to the Site. There were two Bolos. What chance did I have against them?" Mallon grinned craftily. "But Banner was a fool. He died for it." The grin dropped like a stripper's bra. "But when I went to claim my spoils, I discovered how the jackals had set the trap for me."

"That was downright unfriendly of them, Mallon. Oddly enough, it doesn't make me want to stay and hold your hand."

"Don't you understand yet!" Mallon's voice was a dry screech. "Even if you got clear of the Palace, used the Bolo to set yourself up as Baron—you'd never be safe! Not as long as one man was still alive aboard the ship. You'd never have a night's rest, wondering when one of them would walk out to challenge your rule . . . "

"Uneasy lies the head, eh, Toby? You remind me of a queen bee. The first one out of the chrysalis dismembers all her rivals."

"I don't mean to kill them. That would be a waste. I mean to give them useful work to do."

"I don't think they'd like being your slaves, Toby. And neither would I." I looked at Renada. "I'll be leaving you now," I said. "Whichever way you decide, good luck."

"Wait." She stood. "I'm going with you."

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I looked at her. "I'll be traveling fast, honey. And that gun in my back may throw off my timing."

She stepped to me, reversed the pistol and laid it in my hand.

"Don't kill him, Mr. Jackson. He was always kind to me."

"Why change sides now? According to Toby, my chances look not too good."

"I never knew before how Commander Banner died," she said. "He was my great-grandfather."

VII

Renada came back bundled in a gray fur as I finished buckling on my holster.

"So long, Toby," I said. "I ought to shoot you in the belly just for Don—but—"

I saw Renada's eyes widen at the same instant that I heard the click.

I dropped flat and rolled behind Mallon's chair—and a gout of blue flame yammered into the spot where I'd been standing. I whipped the gun up and around into the peach-colored upholstery an inch from Toby's ear.

"The next one nails you to the chair," I yelled. "Call 'em off!" There was a moment of dead silence. Toby sat frozen. I couldn't see who'd been doing the shooting. Then I heard a moan. Renada.

"Let the girl alone or I'll kill him," I called.

Toby sat rigid, his eyes rolled toward me.

"You can't kill me, Jackson! I'm all that's keeping you alive."

"You can't kill me either, Toby. You need my magic touch, remember? Maybe you'd better give us a safe-conduct out of here. I'll take the freeze off your Bolo—after I've seen to my business."

Toby licked his lips. I heard Renada again. She was trying not to moan—but moaning anyway.

"You tried, Jackson. It didn't work out," Toby said through gritted teeth. "Throw out your gun and stand up. I won't kill you—you know that. You do as you're told and you may still live to a ripe old age—and the girl, too."

She screamed then — a mindless ululation of pure agony.

"Hurry up, you feel, before they tear her arm off," Mallon grated. "Or shoot. You'll get to watch her for twenty-four hours under the knife. Then you'll have your turn."

I fired again—closer this time. Mallon jerked his head and cursed.

"If they touch her again, you get it, Toby," I said. "Send her over here. Move!"

"Let her go!" Mallon snarled. Renada stumbled into sight, moved around the chair, then crumpled suddenly to the rug beside me.

"Stand up, Toby," I ordered. He rose slowly. Sweat glistened on his face now. "Stand over here." He moved like a sleepwalker. I got to my feet. There were two men standing across the room beside a small open door. A sliding panel. Both of them held power rifles leveled—but aimed offside, away from the Baron.

"Drop 'em!" I said. They looked at me, then lowered the guns, tossed them aside.

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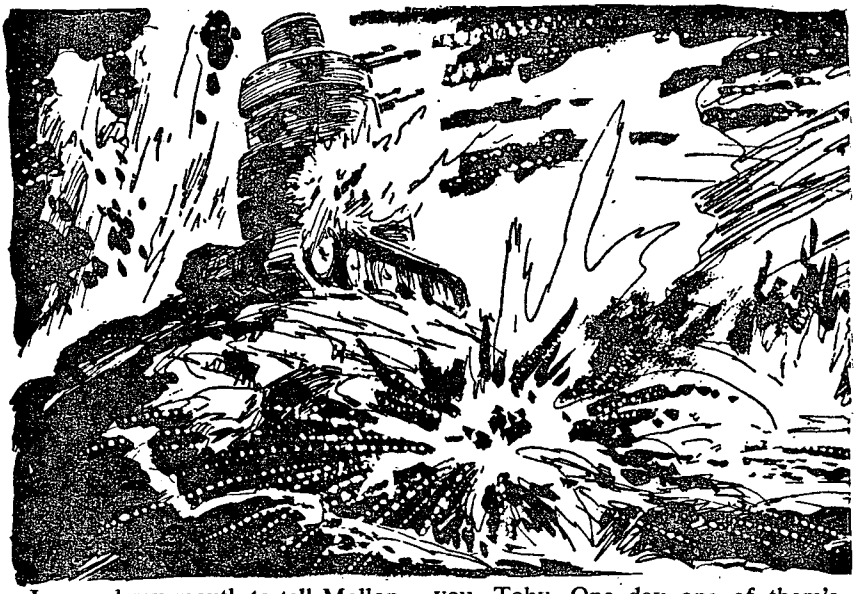

I opened my mouth to tell Mallon to move ahead, but my tongue felt thick and heavy. The room was suddenly full of smoke. In front of me, Mallon was wavering like a mirage. I started to tell him to stand still, but with my thick tongue, it was too much trouble. I raised the gun, but somehow it was falling to the floor,—slowly, like a leaf—and then I was floating, too, on waves that broke on a dark sea . . .

"Do you think you're the first idiot who thought he could kill me?" Mallon raised a contemptuous lip. "This room's rigged ten different ways."

I shook my head, trying to ignore the film before my eyes and the nausea in my body. "No, I imagine lots of people would like a crack at you, Toby. One day one of them's going to make it."

"Get him on his feet," Mallon snapped. Hard hands clamped on my arms, hauled me off the cot. I worked my legs, but they were like yesterday's celery; I sagged against somebody who smelled like uncured hides.

"You seem drowsy," Mallon said. "We'll see if we can't wake you up."

A thumb dug into my neck. I jerked away, and a jab under the ribs doubled me over.

"I have to keep you alive—for the moment," Mallon said. "But you won't get a lot of pleasure out of it."

I blinked hard. It was dark in the room. One of my handlers had a ring of beard around his mouth—I could see that much. Mallon was standing before me, hands on hips. I aimed a kick at him, just for fun. It didn't

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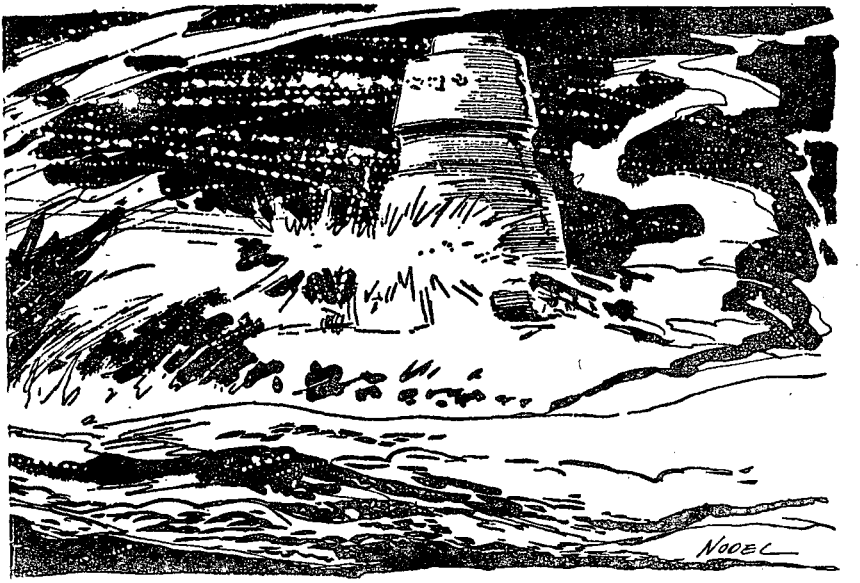

work out; my foot seemed to be wearing a lead boat. The unshaven man hit me in the mouth and Toby chuckled.

"Have your fun, Dunger," he said, "but I'll want him alive and on his feet for the night's work. Take him out and walk him in the fresh air. Report to me at the Pavillion of the Troll in an hour." He turned to something and gave orders about lights and gun emplacements, and I heard Renada's name mentioned.

Then he was gone and I was being dragged through the door and along the corridor.

The exercise helped. By the time the hour had passed, I was feeling weak but normal—except for an aching head and a feeling that there was a strand of spiderweb interfering with my vision. Toby had given me a good meal. Maybe before the night was over he'd regret that mistake . . .

Across the dark grounds, an engine started up, spluttered, then settled down to a steady hum.

"It's time," the one with the whiskers said. He had a voice like soft cheese to match his smell. He took another half-twist in the arm he was holding.

"Don't break it," I grunted. "It belongs to the Baron, remember?"

Whiskers stopped dead. "You talk too much—and too smart." He let my arm go and stepped back. "Hold him, Pig Eye." The other man whipped a forearm across my throat and levered my head back; then Whiskers unlimbered the two-foot club from his belt and hit me hard in the side, just under the ribs. Pig Eye

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let go and I folded over and waited while the pain swelled up and burst inside me.

Then they hauled me back to my feet. I couldn't feel any bone ends grating, so there probably weren't any broken ribs—if that was any consolation.

There were lights glaring now across the lawn. Moving figures cast long shadows against the trees lining the drive—and on the side of the Bolo Combat Unit parked under its canopy by the sealed gate.

A crude breastwork had been thrown up just over fifty yards from it. A wheel-mounted generator putted noisily in the background, laying a layer of bluish exhaust in the air.

Mallon was waiting with a 9 mm power rifle in his hands as we came up, my two guards gripping me with both hands to demonstrate their zeal, and me staggering a little more than was necessary. I saw Renada standing by, wrapped in a gray fur. Her face looked white in the harsh light. She made a move toward me and a greenback caught her arm.

"You know what to do, Jackson," Mallon said speaking loudly against the clatter of the generator. He made a curt gesture and a man stepped up and buckled a stout chain to my left ankle. Mallon held out my electropass. "I want you to walk straight to the Bolo. Go in by the side port. You've got one minute to cancel the instructions punched into the command circuit and climb back outside. If you don't show, I close a switch there—" he pointed to a wooden box mounting an open circuitbreaker, with a tangle of heavy cable leading toward the Bolo—"and you cook in your shoes. The same thing happens if I see the guns start to traverse or the anti-personnel ports open." I followed the coils of armored wire from the chain on my ankle back to the wooden box—and on to the generator.

"Crude, maybe, but it will work. And if you get any idea of letting fly a round or two at random—remember the girl will be right beside me."

I looked across at the giant machine. "Suppose it doesn't recognize me? It's been a while. Or what if Don didn't plug my identity pattern in to the recognition circuit?"

"In that case, you're no good to me anyway," Mallon said flatly.

I caught Renada's eye, gave her a wink and a smile I didn't feel, and climbed up on top of the revetment.

I looked back at Mallon. He was old and shrunken in the garish light, his smooth gray suit rumpled, his thin hair mussed, the gun held in a white-knuckled grip. He looked more like a harrassed shopkeeper than a would-be world-beater.

"You must want the Bolo pretty bad to take the chance, Toby," I said. "I'll think about taking that wild shot. You sweat me out."

I flipped slack into the wire trailing my ankle, jumped down and started across the smooth-trimmed grass, a long black shadow stalking before me. The Bolo sat silent, as big as a bank in the circle of the spotlight. I could see the flecks of rust now around the port covers,

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the small vines that twined up her sides from the ragged stands of weeds that marked no-man's land.

There was something white in the brush ahead. Broken human bones.

I felt my stomach go rigid again. The last man had gotten this far; I wasn't in the clear yet . . .

I passed two more scattered skeletons in the next twenty feet. They must have come in on the run, guinea pigs to test the alertness of the Bolo. Or maybe they'd tried creeping up, dead slow, an inch a day; it hadn't worked . . .

Tiny night creatures scuttled ahead. They would be safe here in the shadow of the troll where no predator bigger than a mouse could move. I stumbled, diverted my course around a ten-foot hollow, the eroded crater of a near miss.

Now I could see the great moss-coated treads, sunk a foot into the earth, the nests of field mice tucked in the spokes of the yard-high bogies. The entry hatch was above, a hairline against the great curved flank. There were rungs set in the flaring tread shield. I reached up, got a grip and hauled myself up. My chain clanked against the metal. I found the door lever, held on and pulled.

It resisted, then turned. There was the hum of a servo motor, a crackling of dead gaskets. The hairline widened and showed me a narrow companionway, green-anodized dural with black polymer treads, a bulkhead with a fire extinguisher, an embossed steel data plate that said BOLO DIVISION OF GENERAL MOTORS CORPORATION and below; in smaller type, UNIT, COMBAT, BOLO MARK III.

I pulled myself inside and went up into the Christmas tree glow of instrument lights.

The control cockpit was small, utilitarian, with two deep-padded seats set among screens, dials, levers. I sniffed the odors of oil, paint, the characteristic ether and ozone of a nuclear generator. There was a faint hum in the air from idling relay servos. The clock showed ten past four. Either it was later than I thought, or the chronometer had lost time in the last eighty years. But I had no time to lose . . .

I slid into the seat, flipped back the cover of the command control console. The Cancel key was the big white one. I pulled it down and let it snap back, like a clerk ringing up a sale.

A pattern of dots on the status display screen flicked out of existence. Mallon was safe from his pet troll now.

It hadn't taken me long to carry out my orders. I knew what to do next; I'd planned it all during my walk out. Now I had thirty seconds to stack the deck in my favor.

I reached down, hauled the festoon of quarter-inch armored cable up in front of me. I hit a switch, and the inner conning cover—a disk of inch-thick armor—slid back. I shoved a loop of the flexible cable up through the aperture, reversed the switch. The cover slid back—sliced the armored cable like macaroni.

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I took a deep breath, and my hands went to the combat alert switch, hovered over it.

It was the smart thing to do—the easy thing. All I had to do was punch a key, and the 9 mm's would open up, scythe Mallon and his crew down like cornstalks.

But the scything would mow Renada down, along with the rest. And if I went—even without firing a shot—Mallon would keep his promise to cut that white throat . . .

My head was out of the noose now but I would have to put it back—for a while.

I leaned sideways, reached back under the panel, groped for a small fuse box. My fingers were clumsy. I took a breath, tried again. The fuse dropped out in my hand. The Bolo's I-R circuit was dead now. With a few more seconds to work. I could have knocked out other circuits—but the time had run out.

I grabbed the cut ends of my lead wire, knotted them around the chain and got out fast.

VIII

Mallon waited, crouched behind the revetment.

"It's safe now, is it?" he grated. I nodded. He stood, gripping his gun.

"Now we'll try it together."

I went over the parapet, Mallon following with his gun ready. The lights followed us to the Bolo. Mallon clambered up to the open port, looked around inside, then dropped back down beside me. He looked excited now.

"That does it, Jackson! I've waited a long time for this. Now I've got all the *Mana* there is!"

"Take a look at the cable on my ankle," I said softly. He narrowed his eyes, stepped back, gun aimed, darted a glance at the cable looped to the chain.

"I cut it, Toby. I was alone in the Bolo with the cable cut—and I didn't fire. I could have taken your toy and set up in business for myself, but I didn't."

"What's that supposed to buy you?" Mallon rasped.

"As you said—we need each other. That cut cable proves you can trust me."

Mallon smiled. It wasn't a nice smile. "Safe, were you? Come here." I walked along with him to the back of the Bolo. A heavy copper wire hung across the rear of the machine, trailing off into the grass in both directions.

"I'd have burned you at the first move. Even with the cable cut, the armored cover would have carried the full load right into the cockpit with you. But don't be nervous. I've got other jobs for you." He jabbed the gun muzzle hard into my chest, pushing me back. "Now get moving," he snarled. "And don't ever threaten the Baron again."

"The years have done more than shrivel your face, Toby," I said. "They've cracked your brain."

He laughed, a short bark. "You could be right. What's sane and what isn't? I've got a vision in my mind—and I'll make it come true. If that's insanity, it's better than what the mob has."

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Back at the parapet, Mallon turned to me. "I've had this campaign planned in detail for years, Jackson. Everything's ready. We move out in half an hour—before any traitors have time to take word to my enemies. Pig Eye and Dunger will keep you from being lonely while I'm away. When I get back—Well, maybe you're right about working together." He gestured and my whiskery friend and his sidekick loomed up. "Watch him," he said.

"Genghis Khan is on the march, eh?" I said, "With nothing between you and the goodies but a five hundred ton Bolo . . . "

"The Lesser Troll . . . " He raised his hands and made crushing motions, like a man crumbling dry earth. "I'll trample it under my treads."

"You're confused, Toby. The Bolo has treads. You just have a couple of fallen arches."

"It's the same. I am the Great Troll." He showed me his teeth and walked away.

I moved along between Dunger and Pig Eye, towards the lights of the garage.

"The back entrance again," I said. "Anyone would think you were ashamed of me."

"You need more training, hah?" Dunger rasped. "Hold him, Pig Eye." He unhooked his club and swung it loosely in his hand, glancing around. We were near the trees by the drive. There was no one in sight except the crews near the Bolo and a group by the front of the palace. Pig Eye gave my arm a twist and shifted his grip to his old favorite strangle hold. I was hoping he would.

Dunger whipped the club up, and I grabbed Pig Eye's arm with both hands and leaned forward like a Japanese admiral reporting to the Emperor. Pig Eye went up and over just in time to catch Dunger's club across the back. They went down together. I went for the club, but Whiskers was faster than he looked. He rolled clear, got to his knees, and laid it across my left arm, just below the shoulder.

I heard the bone go . . .

I was back on my feet, somehow. Pig Eye lay sprawled before me. I heard him whining as though from a great distance. Dunger stood six feet away, the ring of black beard spread in a grin like a hyena smelling dead meat.

"His back's broke," he said. "Hell of a sound he's making. I been waiting for you; I wanted you to hear it."

"I've heard it," I managed. My voice seemed to be coming off a worn sound track. "Surprised . . . you didn't work me over . . . while I was busy with the arm."

"Uh-uh. I like a man to know what's going on when I work him over." He stepped in, rapped the broken arm lightly with the club. Fiery agony choked a groan off in my throat. I backed a step, he stalked me.

"Pig Eye wasn't much, but he was my pal. When I'm through with you, I'll have to kill him. A man with a

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broken back's no use to nobody. His'll be finished pretty soon now, but not with you. You'll be around a long time yet; but I'll get a lot of fun out of you before the Baron gets back."

I was under the trees now. I had some wild thoughts about grabbing up a club of my own, but they were just thoughts. Dunger set himself and his eyes dropped to my belly. I didn't wait for it; I lunged at him. He laughed and stepped back, and the club cracked my head. Not hard; just enough to send me down. I got my legs under me and started to get up—

There was a hint of motion from the shadows behind Dunger. I shook my head to cover any expression that might have showed, let myself drop back.

"Get up," Dunger said. The smile was gone now. He aimed a kick. "Get up—"

He froze suddenly, then whirled. His hearing must have been as keen as a jungle cat's; I hadn't heard a sound.

The old man stepped into view, his white hair plastered wet to his skull, his big hands spread. Dunger snarled, jumped in and whipped the club down; I heard it hit. There was flurry of struggle, then Dunger stumbled back, empty-handed.

I was on my feet again now. I made a lunge for Dunger as he roared and charged. The club in the old man's hand rose and fell. Dunger crashed past and into the brush. The old man sat down suddenly, still holding the club. Then he let it fall and lay back. I went toward him and Dunger rushed me from the side. I went down again.

I was dazed, but not feeling any pain now. Dunger was standing over the old man. I could see the big lean figure lying limply, arms outspread—and a white bone handle, incongruously new and neat against the shabby mackinaw. The club lay on the ground a few feet away. I started crawling for it. It seemed a long way, and it was hard for me to move my legs, but I kept at it. The light rain was falling again now, hardly more than a mist. Far away there were shouts and the sound of engines starting up. Mallon's convoy was moving out. He had won. Dunger had won, too. The old man had tried, but it hadn't been enough. But if I could reach the club, and swing it just once . . .

Dunger was looking down at the old man. He leaned, withdrew the knife, wiped it on his trouser leg, hitching up his pants to tuck it away in its sheath. The club was smooth and heavy under my hand. I got a good grip on it, got to my feet. I waited until Dunger turned, and then I hit him across the top of the skull with everything I had left . . .

I thought the old man was dead until he blinked suddenly. His features looked relaxed now, peaceful, the skin like parchment stretched over bone. I took his gnarled old hand and rubbed it. It was as cold as a drowned sailor.

"You waited for me, Old-Timer?" I said inanely. He moved his head minutely, and looked at me. Then his mouth moved. I leaned close to

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catch what he was saying. His voice was fainter than lost lope.

"Mom . . . told me . . . wait for you . . . She said . . . you'd . . . come back some day . . . "

I felt my jaw muscles knotting.

Inside me something broke and flowed away like molten metal. Suddenly my eyes were blurred—and not only with rain. I looked at the old face before me, and for a moment, I seemed to see a ghostly glimpse of another face, a small round face that looked up.

He was speaking again. I put my head down:

"Was I. . .good. . .boy. . .Dad?" Then the eyes closed.

I sat for a long time, looking at the still face. Then I folded the hands on the chest and stood.

"You were more than a good boy, Timmy," I said. "You were a good man."

IX

My blue suit was soaking wet and splattered with mud, plus a few flecks of what Dunger had used for brains, but it still carried the gold eagles on the shoulders.

The attendant in the garage didn't look at my face. The eagles were enough for him. I stalked to a vast black Bentley — a '70 model, I guessed, from the conservative eighteen-inch tail fins—and jerked the door open. The gauge showed three-quarters full. I opened the glove compartment, rummaged, found nothing. But then it wouldn't be up front with the chauffeur . . .

I pulled open the back door. There was a crude black leather holster riveted against the smooth pale-gray leather, with the butt of a 4 mm showing. There was another one on the opposite door, and a power rifle slung from straps on the back of the driver's seat.

Whoever owned the Bentley was overcompensating his insecurity. I took a pistol, tossed it onto the front seat and slid in beside it. The attendant gaped at me as I eased my left arm into my lap and twisted to close the door. I started up. There was a bad knock, but she ran all right. I flipped a switch and cold lances of light speared out into the rain.

At the last instant, the attendant started forward with his mouth open to say something, but I didn't wait to hear it. I gunned out into the night, slung into the graveled drive, and headed for the gate. Mallon had had it all his way so far, but maybe it still wasn't too late . . .

Two sentries, looking miserable in shiny black ponchos, stepped out of the guard hut as I pulled up. One peered in at me, then came to a sloppy position of attention and presented arms. I reached for the gas pedal and the second sentry called something. The first man looked startled, then swung the gun down to cover me. I eased a hand toward my pistol, brought it up fast and fired through the glass. Then the Bentley was roaring off into the dark along the potholed road that led into town. I thought I heard a shot behind me, but I wasn't sure.

I took the river road south of town, pounding at reckless speed over the ruined blacktop, gaining on

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the lights of Mallon's horde paralleling me a mile to the north. A quarter mile from the perimeter fence, the Bentley broke a spring and skidded into a ditch.

I sat for a moment taking deep breaths to drive back the compulsive drowsiness that was sliding down over my eyes like a visor. My arm throbbed like a cauterized stump. I needed a few minutes rest . . .

A sound brought me awake like an old maid smelling cigar smoke in the bedroom: the rise and fall of heavy engines in convoy. Mallon was coming up at flank speed.

I got out of the car and headed off along the road at a trot, holding my broken arm with my good one to ease the jarring pain. My chances had been as slim as a gambler's wallet all along, but if Mallon beat me to the objective, they dropped to nothing.

The eastern sky had taken on a faint gray tinge, against which I could make out the silhouetted gate posts and the dead floodlights a hundred yards ahead.

The roar of engines was getting louder. There were other sounds, too: a few shouts, the chatter of a 9 mm, the *boom*! of something heavier, and once a long-drawn *whoosh*! of falling masonry. With his new toy, Mallon was dozing his way through the men and buildings that got in his way.

I reached the gate, picked my way over fallen wire mesh, then headed for the Primary Site.

I couldn't run now. The broken slabs tilted crazily, in no pattern. I slipped, stumbled, but kept my feet. Behind me, headlights threw shadows across the slabs. It wouldn't be long now before someone in Mallon's task force spotted me and opened up with the guns—

The whoop! *whoop!* WHOOP! of the guardian Bolo cut across the field.

Across the broken concrete I saw the two red eyes flash, sweeping my way. I looked toward the gate. A massed rank of vehicles stood in a battalion front just beyond the old perimeter fence, engines idling, ranged for a hundred yards on either side of a wide gap at the gate. I looked for the high silhouette of Mallon's Bolo, and saw it far off down the avenue, picked out in red, white and green navigation lights, a jeweled dreadnaught. A glaring cyclopean eye at the top darted a blue-white cone of light ahead, swept over the waiting escort, outlined me like a set-shifter caught onstage by the rising curtain.

The whoop! whoop! sounded again; the automated sentry Bolo was bearing down on me along the dancing lane of light.

I grabbed at the plastic disk in my pocket as though holding it in my hand would somehow heighten its potency. I didn't know if the Lesser Troll was programmed to exempt me from destruction or not; and there was only one way to find out.

It wasn't too late to turn around and run for it. Mallon might shoot—or he might not. I could convince him that he needed me, that together we could grab twice as much loot, And then, when he died—

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I wasn't really considering it; it was the kind of thought that flashes through a man's mind like heat lightning when time slows in the instant of crisis. It was hard to be brave with broken bone ends grating, but what I had to do didn't take courage. I was a small, soft, human grub, stepped on but still moving, caught on the harsh plain of broken concrete between the clash of chrome-steel titans. But I knew which direction to take.

The Lesser Troll rushed toward me in a roll of thunder and I went to meet it.

It stopped twenty yards from me, loomed massive as a cliff. Its heavy guns were dead, I knew. Without them it was no more dangerous than a farmer with a shotgun—

But against me a shotgun was enough.

The slab under me trembled as if in anticipation. I squinted against the dull red IR beams that pivoted to hold me, waiting while the Troll considered. Then the guns elevated, pointed over my head like a benediction. The Bolo knew me.

The guns traversed fractionally. I looked back toward the enemy line, saw the Great Troll coming up now, closing the gap, towering over its waiting escort like a planet among moons. And the guns of the Lesser Troll tracked it as it came—the empty guns, that for twenty years had held Mallon's scavengers at bay.

The noise of engines was deafening now. The waiting line moved restlessly, pulverizing old concrete under churning treads. I didn't realize I was being fired on until I saw chips fly to my left, and heard the howl of richochets.

It was time to move. I scrambled for the Bolo, snorted at the stink of hot oil and ozone, found the rusted handholds, and pulled myself up—

Bullets spanged off metal above me. Someone was trying for me with a power rifle.

The broken arm hung at my side like a fence-post nailed to my shoulder, but I wasn't aware of the pain now. The hatch stood open half an inch. I grabbed the lever, strained; it swung wide. No lights came up to meet me. With the port cracked, they'd burned out long ago. I dropped down inside, wriggled through the narrow crawl space into the cockpit. It was smaller than the Mark III—and it was occupied.

In the faint green light from the panel, the dead man crouched over the controls, one desiccated hand in a shriveled black glove clutching the control bar. He wore a GI weather suit and a white crash helmet, and one foot was twisted nearly backward, caught behind a jack lever.

The leg had been broken before he died. He must have jammed the foot and twisted it so that the pain would hold off the sleep that had come at last. I leaned forward to see the face. The blackened and mummified features showed only the familiar anonymity of death, but the bushy reddish mustache was enough.

"Hello, Mac," I said. "Sorry to keep you waiting; I got held up."

I wedged myself into the co-pilot's seat, flipped the IR screen switch.

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The eight-inch panel glowed, showed me the enemy Bolo trampling through the fence three hundred yards away, then moving onto the ramp, dragging a length of rusty chain-link like a bridal train behind it.

I put my hand on the control bar. "I'll take it now, Mac." I moved the bar, and the dead man's hand moved with it.

"Okay, Mac," I said. "We'll do it together."

I hit the switches, canceling the preset response pattern. It had done its job for eighty years, but now it was time to crank in a little human strategy.

My Bolo rocked slightly under a hit and I heard the tread shields drop down. The chair bucked under me as Mallon moved in, pouring in the fire.

Beside me, Mac nodded patiently. It was old stuff to him. I watched the tracers on the screen. Hosing me down with contact exploders probably gave Mallon a lot of satisfaction, but it couldn't hurt me. It would be a different story when he tired of the game and tried the heavy stuff.

I threw in the drive, backed rapidly. Mallon's tracers followed for a few yards, then cut off abruptly. I pivoted, flipped on my polyarcs, raced for the position I had selected across the field, then swung to face Mallon as he moved toward me. It had been a long time since he had handled the controls of a Bolo; he was rusty, relying on his automatics. I had no heavy rifles, but my popguns were okay. I homed my 4 mm solid-slug cannon on Mallon's polyarc, pressed the FIRE button.

There was a scream from the high-velocity-feed magazine. The blue-white light flared and went out. The Bolo's defenses could handle anything short of an H-bomb, pick a missile out of the stratosphere fifty miles away, devastate a county with one round from its mortars—but my BB gun at point-blank range had poked out its eye.

I switched everything off and sat silent, waiting. Mallon had come to a dead stop. I could picture him staring at the dark screens, slapping levers and cursing. He would be confused, wondering what had happened. With his lights gone, he'd be on radar now—not very sensitive at this range, not too conscious of detail . . .

I watched my panel. An amber warning light winked. Mallon's radar was locked on me.

He moved forward again, then stopped; he was having trouble making up his mind. I flipped a key to drop a padded shock frame in place, and braced myself. Mallon would be getting mad now.

Crimson danger lights flared on the board and I rocked under the recoil as my interceptors flashed out to meet Mallon's C-S C's and detonate them in incandescent rendezvous over the scarred concrete between us. My screens went white, then dropped back to secondary brilliance, flashing stark black-and-white. My ears hummed like trapped hornets.

The sudden silence was like a vault door closing.

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I sagged back, feeling like Quasimodo after a wild ride on the bells. The screens blinked bright again, and I watched Mallon, sitting motionless now in his near blindness. On his radar screen I would show as a blurred hill; he would be wondering why I hadn't returned his fire, why I hadn't turned and run, why . . . why . . .

He lurched and started toward me. I waited, then eased back, slowly. He accelerated, closing in to come to grips at a range where even the split micro-second response of my defenses would be too slow to hold off his fire. And I backed, letting him gain, but not too fast . . .

Mallon couldn't wait.

He opened up, throwing a mixed bombardment from his 9 mm's, his infinite repeaters, and his C-S C's. I held on, fighting the battering frame, watching the screens. The gap closed; a hundred yards, ninety, eighty.

The open silo yawned in Mallon's path now, but he didn't see it. The mighty Bolo came on, guns bellowing in the night, closing for the kill. On the brink of the fifty-foot-wide, hundred-yard-deep pit, it hesitated as though sensing danger. Then it moved forward.

I saw it rock, dropping its titanic prow, showing its broad back, gouging the blasted pavement as its guns bore on the ground. Great sheets of sparks flew as the treads reversed, too late. The Bolo hung for a moment longer, then slid down majestically as a sinking liner, its guns still firing into the pit like a challenge to Hell. And then it was gone. A dust cloud boiled for a moment, then whipped away as displaced air tornadoed from the open mouth of the silo.

And the earth trembled under the impact far below.

X

The doors of the Primary Site blockhouse were nine-foot-high, eight-inch-thick panels of solid chromalloy that even a Bolo would have slowed down for, but they slid aside for my electropass like a shower curtain at the YW. I went into a shadowy room where eighty years of silence hung like black crepe on a coffin. The tiled floor was still immaculate, the air fresh. Here at the heart of the Aerospace Center, all systems were still go.

In the Central Control bunker, nine rows of green lights glowed on the high panel over red letters that spelled out STAND BY TO FIRE. A foot to the left, the big white lever stood in the unlocked position, six inches from the outstretched fingertips of the mummified corpse strapped into the controller's chair. To the right, a red glow on the monitor panel indicated the locked doors open.

I rode the lift down to K level, stepped out onto the steel-railed platform that hugged the sweep of the starship's hull and stepped through into the narrow COC.

On my right, three empty stasis tanks stood open, festooned cabling draped in disorder. To the left were the four sealed covers under which Day, Macy, Cruciani and Black waited. I went close, read dials.

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Slender needles trembled minutely to the beating of sluggish hearts.

They were alive.

I left the ship, sealed the inner and outer ports. Back in the control bunker, the monitor panel showed ALL CLEAR FOR LAUNCH now. I studied the timer, set it, turned back to the master panel. The white lever was smooth and cool under my hand. It seated with a click. The red hand of the launch clock moved off jerkily, the ticking harsh in the silence.

Outside, the Bolo waited. I climbed to a perch in the open conning tower twenty feet above the broken pavement, moved off toward the west where sunrise colors picked out the high towers of the palace.

I rested the weight of my splinted and wrapped arm on the balcony rail, looking out across the valley and the town to the misty plain under which *Prometheus* waited.

"There's something happening now," Renada said. I took the binoculars, watched as the silo doors rolled back.

"There's smoke," Renada said.

"Don't worry, just cooling gases ing vented off." I looked at my watch. "Another minute or two and man makes the biggest jump since the first lungfish crawled out on a mud-flat."

"What will they find out there?"

I shook my head. "*Homo Terra Firma* can't even conceive of what *Homo Astra* has ahead of him."

"Twenty years they'll be gone. It's a long time to wait."

"We'll be busy trying to put together a world for them to come back to. I don't think we'll be bored."

"Look!" Renada gripped my good arm. A long silvery shape, huge even at the distance of miles, rose slowly out of the earth, poised on a brilliant ball of white fire. Then the sound came, a thunder that penetrated my bones, shook the railing under my hand. The fireball lengthened into a silver-white column with the ship balanced at its tip. Then the column broke free, rose up, up . . .

I felt Renada's hand touch mine. I gripped it hard. Together we watched as *Prometheus* took man's gift of fire back to the heavens.

END

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THE HERMIT OF MARS

BY STEPHEN BARTHOLOMEW

He was the oldest man on Mars . . . in fact, the only one!

When Martin Devere was 23 and still working on his Master's, he was hurt by a woman. It was then that he decided that the only things that were worthwhile in life were pure art and pure science. That, of course, is another story, but it may explain why he choose to become an archeologist in the first place.

Now he was the oldest human being on Mars. He was 91. For many years, in fact, he had been the *only* human being on Mars. Up until today.

He looked through the transparent wall of his pressurized igloo at the puff of dust in the desert where the second rocket had come down. Earth and Mars were just past conjunction, and the regular automatic supply rocket had landed two days ago. As usual, Martin Devere, taking his own good time about it, had unloaded the supplies, keeping the things he really needed and throwing away the useless stuff like the latest microfilmed newspapers and magazines, the taped TV shows and concerts. As payment for his groceries he had then reloaded the rocket with the written reports he had accumulated since the last conjunction, plus a few artifacts.

Then he had pushed a button and sent the rocket on its way again, back to Earth. He didn't mind writing the reports. Most of them were rubbish anyway, but they seemed to keep the people back at the Institute happy. He did mind the artifacts. It seemed wrong to remove them, though he sent only the less valuable ones back. But per-

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haps it couldn't be helped. One time, the supply rocket had failed to return when he pushed its red button — the thing was still sitting out there in the desert, slowly rusting. Martin Devere had happily unloaded the artifacts and put them back where they belonged. It wasn't his fault.

The puff of dust on the horizon was beginning to settle. This second rocket had descended with a shrill scream through the thin air, its voice more highly pitched then it would have been in denser atmosphere. Martin Devere had looked up from his work in time to see its braking jets vanish behind the low Martian hills a few kilometers distant.

It was much too large to be an automatic supply rocket, even if there had been reason to expect another one. Martin Devere knew it could mean only one thing — someone was paying him an unannounced visit.

He waited, watching through the igloo wall to see who had come to poke around and bother him after all these years.

At first he was annoyed that the people at the Institute hadn't let him know visitors were coming. Then he reminded himself that it had been years since he'd taken the trouble to listen to his radio receiver, or to read the messages they sent him along with supplies.

After a long time, he made out a smaller dust-puff, and then a little sandcat advancing slowly across the desert. Riding on top of it were two men in space suits.

Everyone on Earth who reads popular magazines or watches TV knows the story of Martin Devere, "The Hermit of Mars." Over the years, now that he is dead, he has become a sort of culture hero, as Dr. Livingston or Albert Schweitzer once were. Though Martin Devere could not be called a humanitarian in any sense of the word. After his divorce from his first and only wife, at the age of 45, he never gave much thought again either to women or any other kind of people — except for his long-dead Martians.

But everyone should know by now how Martin Devere first came to Mars at the age of 50. Even then he was the oldest man on the planet, and Mars sustained quite a large research colony at the time. Only Martin Devere's unchallenged scientific reputation, together with his apparent good health, enabled him to leave Earth as head of a five-man archeological team. This turned up the first fossil ruins far beneath the desert sand.

Then there came a day when the Space Institute of the United Governments decided to abandon Project Mars. It was getting too expensive to maintain. Everything of value to space research had already been learned about the planet, and the archeological site, though yet barely scratched, did not properly come under space research. Closing Project Mars would mean more funds for solar research, on Mercury, for the Lunar colony and for work on the interstellar drive.

So the hundred-odd inhabitants of

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the Project received orders to leave the igloos and other equipment behind and come back to Earth.

Martin Devere, however, had been on Mars for three years now. When the Project physician gave him his routine exam, it was discovered that a valve in Martin Devere's aorta had developed a faint flutter. Nothing too serious, really. But enough to greatly reduce his chances of surviving another rocket lift-off.

Martin Devere smiled at the news and volunteered to remain behind, alone on Mars. Under the circumstances, the Institute was forced to agree.

On the day that the strange rocket came down behind the desert hills, Martin Devere had been on Mars for a total of 38 years. For the past 35 of them he had been The Hermit — and quite happy about it. . .

The little sandcat was getting closer. Martin Devere smiled to himself, watching the two men in their clumsy space gear. It was high noon, and a nice comfortable ten degrees centigrade outside. If the two newcomers thought they needed full spacesuits to get around out there, Martin Devere wasn't going to tell them any different. Actually, though the atmospheric pressure was about the same as at the top of Mount Everest, on a beautiful day like this a man could get along easily outdoors with nothing more than an oxygen mask. But let them clomp around in their rubberized long-johns if they wanted to.

In a few minutes they would be coming in through the igloo's airlock. Martin Devere turned away, scowling now. He hoped the Institute hadn't decided to reopen Mars Project. There was plenty of room in all these igloos and connecting tunnels that had been left behind, but with a new expedition here it might get pretty crowded. Mainly, Devere didn't want a bunch of amateurs poking around his diggings, breaking things.

His thumb rubbed slowly across the long stubble on his chin. He wondered if he had made some slip in that last report, or in some of the pictures of the ruins he'd sent back. He'd rather the Institute didn't find out about those fossilized machines he'd dug up. He didn't understand the gadgets himself, but some of the people at the Institute just might decide they were interesting enough to be worth sending up an expert.

The Institute, Devere knew, was interested in machinery, not art objects.

One of the men held an automatic pistol pointed at Martin Devere while the other was stripping off his space gear. Then the pistol changed hands while the first man removed his own suit. Martin Devere could have told them that he wasn't afraid of the gun. He didn't actually care much, one way or the other: let them point it if it made them happy. Martin Devere figured that he had already lived a lot longer, here in this feeble gravity and germ-free, oxygen-rich air, than his

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tricky heart would have allowed him on Earth. Let them point the gun if they wanted to.

"If you make one move toward the radio transmitter I'll blow your head off," the taller man said. He had black wavy hair that hung over his brow. The other man was completely bald.

"I don't even know if the radio works," Martin Devere answered. "I haven't turned it on in years. I should warn you, though, that if you shoot that thing inside the igloo here, it will puncture the plastic wall and let all the air out. I always keep the pressure up high indoors so I can boil water for coffee."

The tall man frowned in confusion and blinked at the weapon in his hand. Then he stared at the transparent dome above him, as if realizing for the first time that only a thin bubble of plastic separated him from near-vacuum, now that he had removed his suit.

"I was just making some coffee when you showed up," Martin Devere said, turning away. "Have some? I'm afraid it's instant. I've given up trying to get the Institute to send me a can of real coffee in the rocket. They think I need canned TV shows more."

"He's harmless," the bald man said. "You can see he's just an old senile nut. Leave him be, we've work to do."

The tall man lowered his weapon, then let it fall into the holster at his hip.

"No big hurry. I think I'd like some of that coffee first. Say, Pop, how about cooking us a meal in a couple of hours?"

Martin Devere was spooning brown powder into three cups.

"Sure thing. What would you like — beans and franks, or franks and beans?"

"I suppose you wonder what we're doing, Pop?" The tall man held the disassembled pieces of his gun in his lap. He was carefully polishing each part with a chemically treated cloth.

It was three days since they had landed, and the tall metal skeleton was beginning to take shape out in the desert. At the moment, the bald man was out alone, testing circuits. Usually the two went out together — they had apparently decided it was safe to leave Martin Devere unguarded, though they had smashed his radio transmitter just in case.

The two men worked steadily during the daylight hours, came back at sunset to eat and sleep, then went out again at dawn. The towering lacework of steel was growing like an ugly flower.

The tall man held the trigger assembly of his gun up to the light. He turned it slowly between his thumb and forefinger. It cast an odd crescent-shaped shadow over the muscles of his jaw.

"No, I don't wonder what you're doing," Martin Devere answered. He was sitting at his workbench, crouched over an ancient metal plate as thin as paper.

The tall man began to put his weapon back together again. He

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snapped the trigger assembly into the receiver. He pulled the hammer back and then released it; it made a sharp, hard click.

"Not even curious, Pop? Okay, then tell me what *you're* doing. What's that piece of tinfoil you've been staring at the past two hours?"

Martin Devere straightened and turned to look at the other.

"It's an ancient Martian scroll. It's nearly a million years old. I found it in a new pit I've been digging, five hundred meters down. It's the longest and perhaps most important bit of Martian writing I've found so far."

"Yeah? What's it have to say?"

Martin Devere shook his head. "Their language, their whole frame of reference, was fundamentally different from ours. It's something like higher mathematics, you'd have to learn the language to understand it. But I suppose you might say that this is a poem...Yes, an epic poem."

The tall man laughed. He shoved an ammunition clip into his weapon, pumped a round into the chamber, slipped the gun back into its holster. He got up and began pacing the floor of the igloo. The floor was cluttered with dozens of artifacts.

He stopped and nudged one specimen with his toe.

"What's this thing, Pop? An ancient Martian meatgrinder?"

"I hardly think so. They were vegetarians." He squinted at the object. "I'm afraid I have no idea what it is. It's some sort of machine, but I'm no engineer, I can't imagine what its function was. They — don't build many machines, you know."

The man with the gun turned to stare at Martin Devere.

"You mean *didn't* build, don't you?"

"Yes, of course...Past tense." And Devere turned again to peer at the million-year-old poem before him.

"Damn it to hell. This might hold us up a week." The bald man flung the shatterproof helmet of his suit against the igloo wall. His tone of voice was matter-of-fact emotionless. Even the way he threw the helmet betrayed no real emotion. Still wearing the rest of his suit he sat down at Martin Devere's work bench and clenched his fists. His face was smooth, blank.

"What's the matter?" His partner put down some drawings and came over.

"The modulator circuit doesn't check out. I'll have to take the whole works apart and start over again." The bald man spoke — when he did speak—with a faint accent that Martin Devere could not identify.

"It doesn't matter." The other rubbed at his chin. "We're still ahead of our schedule."

"Hey. Old man." The bald man pointed at Devere. "You have anything to drink in this cave of yours?"

Martin Devere frowned, thinking. He remembered a bottle he'd been saving for some special occasion — he couldn't recall what, just now.

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"I think I have some bourbon," he said at last. "If I can find it."

"Find it. Mine straight, on the rocks."

When Martin Devere returned awhile later, the bald man was still wearing his helmetless space suit. He and his friend were studying a complex wiring diagram spread out on the work bench.

Martin Devere put two plastic cups down on the bench and poured them full. Neither of the men looked up from their diagram until he had set the bottle down.

"Pour one for yourself, Pop," the tall man said.

"Thanks. Don't mind if I do." Devere went to get another cup. Over his shoulder he said, "Hope you boys don't mind crushed ice instead of cubes. I just set a bucket of water in one of the unheated tunnels for a couple minutes. Then I hit it with a hammer."

It was four hours past sunset, the temperature outside was far below freezing.

"One thing you don't need on Mars is a refrigerator!" Pouring himself a drink, the old man suddenly laughed. It was a brief, senile giggle, that made the tall man turn to stare at him.

"Could be uncomfortable, though, if you were ever stuck out there at night." Martin Devere's face was sober once more as he lifted his cup and looked deeply into it. All trace of senility had vanished as suddenly as it had appeared. "Like, say, if you were out there long enough for your suit power to go dead. You'd freeze to a hunk of ice in a few minutes . . . Me, I never go outside at night."

"Shut up," the bald man said.

All day the bald man had been out alone, working on his electronic circuits. Evidently this left his partner nothing to do except study schematics.

Now Martin Devere was aware that his guest had been staring at him for several minutes without speaking. Martin Devere went on polishing the green crystal vase he held in his hand. The vase looked ordinary at first glance, until you noticed that it wasn't quite symmetrical. There was a studied and careful asymmetry about its form, barely discernible, that would disturb you the more you looked at it — until you knew suddenly that no human brain could have created that shape.

The polishing cloth moved rhythmically across the vase's curving surfaces. The green crystal reflected light in a way that made you begin to think about boundless seas of water.

"I'll be glad when this job is over with," the tall man said, half aloud.

"When it is, will you go away?" Martin Devere turned the vase slowly in his hands.

"Not for a while yet, Pop." The man with the gun on his hip got to his feet and stretched.

"I don't mind telling you what it's all about, Pop. You're all right. It's simple. My partner and I were sent here by a certain national power that doesn't like being told how to run its own affairs by the United

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Governments. We're striking the first blow for Freedom. That thing we're putting together out there is a bomb. It could — disable — most of Earth. It has a new kind of nuclear rocket engine behind it that could carry it across 200 million miles in a few hours.

"You get the idea, Pop? Here on Mars, they won't even find it. And if they did, we could deliver the bomb before they got a missile halfway across . . . So I hope you won't mind if my partner and I stay a while, Pop."

It was several seconds before Martin Devere answered. He set the crystal vase carefully inside a case and regarded it a moment.

"As long as you don't go messing up my diggings or break any of the artifacts, it's no business of mine."

"And what if I did, Pop?" The tall man walked closer to Martin Devere. He stood over the old man, his shadow on him. His hand rested lightly on the butt of his gun. "What if I were to take all your vases and statues and pots and tablets and smash them to bits, one by one? What would you do then?"

Martin Devere's eyes slowly closed and opened, he made no other move for a minute. Then he got to his feet without looking at the other man. He turned and began to move away, toward a tunnel door that led to the diggings.

Probably the tall man thought that he had finally put the fear of God into Martin Devere. But as he turned back to his pile of schematics he heard the old man's whisper:

"You might regret it."

The man with the gun did not answer

"Tell us about it, Pop."

"Yes, why don't you tell us about it."

They meant Martin Devere's work. The two men had finished their own job. The assembled bomb rested in the desert, silent but alive, like some abnormal growth.

Because of sunspot activity they hadn't yet been able to radio their employers on Earth. The bald man expected conditions to clear in two or three days. When they did clear, he would signal, "The bird is nesting." Then the nation he had mentioned would be ready to deliver its ultimatum to the United Governments.

For the first time since landing on Mars, the two men were idle. They were waiting. They looked as if they were willing to wait a long time if necessary.

Meanwhile, Martin Devere's artifacts were the only amusements available.

Perhaps the old man knew they were making fun of him. But he seemed to take their question seriously. When he began to speak, they found themselves listening.

"We don't know exactly what happened." Martin Devere faced the two men across the cluttered workbench like a lecturer addressing his students. He held in his hand a small bronze statue that might have been a portrayal of one of the old Martian people or, just as likely, some long-extinct animal. In the

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diffuse sunlight that came through the igloo wall, it cast a shadow on the work bench that was even more disturbingly alien in shape.

"No, we don't know what happened to them," the old man said. "The last of them died nearly a million years ago, before the first Homo Sapiens walked the Earth. From what we — I, — have found we know a little about what they were like. But we don't know why they died.

"We do know, for instance, that they never had much interest in technology. Not that they lacked intelligence. They could build a machine when it suited their purposes, whatever those may have been. And I don't say they weren't interested in science. They had a highly developed theoretical science, as sophisticated as their art. You might say they were theoreticians. They were concerned with pure art and pure science — but not with applied technology, or commercialized art.

"My own theory is that they had no need for technology. In the first place, they were vegetarians, not carnivorous. So that their earliest men had no need for hunting weapons — or other gadgets. Probably they never developed the aggressive instincts which in humanity led to warfare with its subsequent impetus to applied technology. The Martians never got around to making cars or airplanes or bombs. They dedicated themselves, gentlemen, to the contemplation of beauty.

"Then, nearly a million years ago, something happened to them. Perhaps Mars began to lose her atmosphere then. Her oceans evaporated, the air could no longer retain her heat at night, the farmlands parched and froze. A few of the plant types were able to adapt and survive. But within a few years, all animal life died out. One day, there were suddenly no more Martians left."

Martin Devere's dry, withered hand caressed the small statue he held.

"Who knows? If they'd had time to develop space travel they might have saved themselves. Then again, with a technology like yours, they might have blown themselves up long before the natural catastrophe. . ."

"What do you mean like *yours?*" the tall man said. "You mean like *ours,* don't you?"

But Martin Devere turned away without answering.

"Do you have another bottle of bourbon, old man?"

"No, I'm afraid not," Devere said. "There was only that one bottle."

"Too bad. We should have a little celebration." The bald man began sealing himself into his spacesuit.

"I'll wait for you here," his partner said. "I'd better start burning those plans."

Martin Devere looked up from the fragment of ceramic he was cleaning.

"You're going to send the message now?"

Neither of the men bothered to reply, since the answer was self-

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evident. The bald man tested the air and power equipment of his suit, then turned to his partner a moment before sealing his helmet.

"You checked the sandcat's power supply?"

"Yes, but you'd better take another look at it. I think the battery's leaking."

The bald man nodded and went out the airlock. Martin Devere watched in silence as the other man began to gather up his diagrams and plans and tie them into a neat bundle.

"I guess we can take it easy now, Pop. As soon as that telegram's sent and I get this stuff burned, my partner and I are unemployed. Of course we'll have to hang around a while longer in case they want us to shoot off Baby out there, but there's nothing to that. In the meantime maybe I can help you dig up some more of those old pots and statues."

Martin Devere seemed to be thinking. He watched as the tall man checked to make sure he hadn't forgotten anything, then carried the bundle of plans over to the electronic oven.

"*Baby*. You mean your bomb, out there. You think you might actually shoot it off then."

"Oh, maybe, maybe not."

"Couldn't they fire it from Earth by radio?" Devere asked.

"Nope. Somebody might try jamming."

"Oh, I see..."

Martin Devere was silent again until the tall man opened the oven and removed a bundle of gray ash. He dumped the ashes into a bucket and began stirring them with his hand.

"Something else I was wondering about," Devere said. He began cleaning the fragment of ceramic again, his hands working in a slow circular motion.

"Supposing the United Governments find out where it — the bomb is. They might send a missile to blow it up."

"Told you, Pop. Baby can outrun anything else that flies. Wouldn't do them any good."

"Yes, yes... Still, the missile would hit Mars, wouldn't it? I mean, it would destroy all this — the igloos, my diggings..."

The tall man gave a laugh.

"Don't worry so much, Pop. We'd have plenty of time to get in the ship and clear out. We might even take you with us."

"Still..." But the old man lapsed again into thought.

An hour later, the short-range radio gave a shrill beep. The tall man went over and flipped the *talk* switch.

"Yeah?"

"Hello. Listen, I did something stupid."

Martin Devere looked up at the sound of the bald man's voice. Devere's hands still held the piece of ceramic. He had polished it until a complex geometric design was visible, etched in reds and blues. It might have been equally a decoration or some mechanical diagram.

"Did you get the message sent?" the tall man asked.

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"Yes, that part's all right. I got to the ship and contacted headquarters. I think they're going to deliver the ultimatum right away. Now we just wait for orders. The only thing is, the sandcat's power went dead on me while I was halfway down a hill. It started to roll, and I forgot I was wearing a spacesuit. I jumped out. This low gravity fooled me too. I think I've broken my ankle, it hurts like hell."

The tall man cursed in a low voice.

"All right, all right," he said after a moment. "Just take it easy. I'll have to come out and get you."

"I think the sandcat is all right. Stupid of me to jump like that, wasn't thinking. Better bring a spare battery with you . . . Oh, and you'd better bring a light too. It will be getting dark in another half hour."

"Okay, just wait for me. I'll home in on your suit radio."

The tall man switched off the receiver and went to his own suit locker. Martin Devere watched as he removed the holster and weapon from his hip. He pulled the heavy plastic trousers over his denim jumper and then buckled the gun back again before starting on the rest of the spacesuit.

"Nothing serious, I hope?" Martin Devere put the ceramic down carefully and picked up another object from a stack of artifacts.

"You heard, didn't you? You any good at setting a broken ankle, Pop?"

"Oh, I could manage, I guess. Broke my arm down in the diggings once. Had to set it myself. Twenty years ago, I think it was. I've been more careful since then." He gave a laugh. It started as a normal laugh, then broke to a senile giggle. Then his face was serious again. He carried the new artifact closer to the man with the gun.

"You know, I was telling you... The Martians were vegetarians. They never made any weapons for hunting. They did know about explosives, though."

"What's that thing?" The tall man, struggling with the buckles of his breathing equipment, glanced at the object in Devere's hands. It looked like badly corroded bronze, and consisted of a long tube with a large bulb at one end.

"This? Oh, this is some kind of a tool I found. I think it was a digging tool, used for breaking up rocks. They *did* build canals, you know... As I was saying, they knew about explosives. This tool, for instance. It worked by means of a small, shaped charge inside this bulb here. The explosion was so well-focused that there was almost no recoil. A high-energy shock wave was emitted from the barrel — very effective at short range. But the most amazing thing about this tool is that the chemical explosive is still potent after lying underground for nearly a million years...

"Oh, by the way. There's nothing wrong with your sandcat's battery. It was the motor I sabotaged."

Then Martin Devere pointed the ancient digging tool at the tall man and blew him into two neat pieces.

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The Hermit of Mars never did get around to walking out to the space ship and using his visitor's radio to tell Earth what had happened. He really intended to, but he forgot. The ultimatum that was delivered to the United Governments failed, of course, but no one knew exactly why until the next Earth-Mars conjunction.

The United Governments was prevailed on by the World Television Service to send out someone to interview the Hermit, if he were still alive.

That interview was unfortunate. It might have established Martin Devere as the world hero that he was, and he might have been awarded some kind of medal. As it went, his rude and insulting answers to the young man's questions made him unpopular for years.

His last answer in the interview was the worst. The young man, already sweating, looked in desperation at the green crystal vase that Martin Devere insisted on holding in front of the television lens. (Back at the Institute, a dozen faces were flushing red with indignation as their owners realized what the old man had been holding back.)

"Tell me, Dr. Devere," the young man asked. "You seem — er — a very modest man. Doesn't it make you the least bit proud to know that you've saved the world?"

Martin Devere lowered his vase and gave the young man a puzzled look.

"You mean Earth? Tell me, why should I want to save *that* world?"

END

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THE GOOD FRIENDS

BY CORDWAINER SMITH

Space sailors need friends—and good design will always find a way to provide them!

Fever had given him a boyish look. The nurse, standing behind the doctor, watched him attentively. Her half-smile blended tenderness with an appreciation of his manly attraction.

"When can I go, doc?"

"In a few weeks, perhaps. You have to get well first."

"I don't mean home, doc. When can I go back into space? I'm captain, doc. I'm a good one. You know that, don't you?"

The doctor nodded gravely.

"I want to go back, doc. I want to go back right away. I want to be well, doc. I want to be well *now*. I want to get back in my ship and take off again. I don't even know why I'm here. What are you doing with me, doc?"

"We're trying to make you well," said the doctor, friendly, serious, authoritative.

"I'm not sick, doc. You've got the wrong man. We brought the ship in, didn't we? Everything was all right, wasn't it? Then we started to get out and everything went black. Now I'm here in a hospital. Something's pretty fishy, doc. Did I get hurt in the port?"

"No," said the doctor, "you weren't hurt at the port."

"Then why'd I faint? Why am I sick in a bed? Something must have happened to me, doc. It stands to reason. Otherwise I wouldn't be here. Some stupid awful thing must have happened, doc. After such a nice trip. Where did it happen?" A wild light came into the patient's eyes. "Did somebody do something to me,

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doc? I'm not hurt, am I? I'm not ruined, am I? I'll be able to go back into space, won't I?"

"Perhaps," said the doctor.

The nurse drew in her breath as though she were going to say something. The doctor looked around at her and gave her an authoritative frown, meaning *keep quiet.*

The patient saw it.

Desperation came into his voice, almost a whine? "What's the matter, doc? Why won't you talk to me? What's wrong? Something has happened to me. Where's Ralph? Where's Pete? Where's Jock? The last time I saw him he was having a beer. Where's Larry? Where's Went? Where's Betty? Where's my gang, doc? They're not killed, are they? I'm not the only one, am I? Talk to me, doc. Tell me the truth. I'm a space captain, doc. I've faced queer hells in my time, doc. You can tell me anything, doc. I'm not *that* sick. I can take it. Where's my gang, doc—my pals from the ship? What a cruise that was! Won't you talk, doc?"

"I'll talk," said the doctor, gravely.

"Okay," said the patient. "Tell me."

"What in particular?"

"Don't be a fool, doc! Tell me the straight stuff. Tell me about my friends first, and then tell me what has happened to me."

"Concerning your friends," said the doctor, measuring his words carefully, "I am in a position to tell you there has been no adverse change in the status of any of the persons you mentioned."

"All right, then, doc, if it wasn't them, it's me. Tell me. What's *happened* to me, doc? Something stinking awful must have happened or you wouldn't be standing there with a face like a constipated horse!"

The doctor smiled wryly, bleakly, briefly at the weird compliment. "I won't try to explain my own face, young fellow. I was born with it. But you are in a serious condition and we are trying to get you well. I will tell you the whole truth."

"Then do it, doc! Right away. Did somebody jump me at the port? Was I hurt badly? Was it an accident? Start talking, man!"

The nurse stirred behind the doctor. He looked around at her. She looked in the direction of the hypodermic on the tray. The doctor gave her a brief negative shake of his head. The patient saw the whole interplay and understood it correctly.

"That's right, doc. Don't let her dope me. I don't need sleep. I need the truth. If my gang's all right, why aren't they here? Is Milly out in the corridor? Milly, that was her name, the little curlyhead. Where's Jock? Why isn't Ralph here?"

"I'm going to tell you everything, young man. It may be tough but I'm counting on you to take it like a man. But it would help if you told me first."

"Told you what? Don't you know who I am? Didn't you read about my gang and me? Didn't you hear about Larry? What a navigator! We wouldn't be here except for Larry."

The late-morning light poured in through the open window; a soft spring breeze touched the young rav-

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aged face of the patient. There was mercy and more in the doctor's voice.

"I'm just a medical doctor. I don't keep up with the news. I know your name, age and medical history. But I don't know the details of your cruise. Tell me about it."

"Doc, you're kidding. It'd take a book. We're famous. I bet Went's out there, right now, making a fortune out of the pictures he took."

"Don't tell me the whole thing, young man. Suppose you just tell me about the last couple of days before you landed, and how you got into port."

The young man smiled guiltily; there was pleasure and fond memory in his face. "I guess I can tell you, because you're a doctor and keep things confidential."

The doctor nodded, very earnest and still kind. "Do you want," said he softly, "the nurse to leave?"

"Oh, no," cried the patient. "She's a good scout. It's not as though you were going to turn it loose on the tapes."

The doctor nodded. The nurse nodded and smiled, too. She was afraid that there were tears forming at the corners of her eyes, but she dared not wipe them away. This was an extraordinarily observant patient. He might notice it. It would ruin his story.

The patient almost babbled in his eagerness to tell the story. "You know the ship, doc. It's a big one: Twelve cabins, a common room, simulated gravity, lockers, plenty of room."

The doctor's eyes flickered at this but he did nothing, except to watch the patient in an attentive sympathetic way.

"When we knew we just had two days to earth, doc, and we knew everything was all right, we had a ball. Jock found the beer in one of the lockers. Ralph helped him get it out. Betty was an old pal of mine, but I started trying to make time with Milly. Boy, did I make it! Yum." He looked at the nurse and blushed all the way down to his neck. "I'll skip the details. We had a party, doc. We were high. Drunk. Happy. Boy, did we have fun! I don't think anybody ever had more fun than we did, me and that old gang of mine. We docked all right. That Larry, he's a navigator. He was drunk as an owl and he had Betty on his lap but he put that ship in like the old lady putting a coin in the collection plate. Everything came out exactly right. I guess I should have been ashamed of landing a ship with the whole crew drunk and happy, but it was the best trip and the best gang and the best fun that anybody ever had. And we had succeeded in our mission, doc. We wouldn't have cut loose at the end of the mission if we hadn't known everything was hunky-dory. So we came in and landed, doc. And then everything went black, and here I am. Now you tell me your side of it, but be sure to tell me when Larry and Jock and Went are going to come in and see me. They're characters, doc. That little nurse of yours, she's going to have to watch them. They might bring me a bottle that I shouldn't have. Okay, doc. Shoot."

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"Do you trust me?" said the doctor.

"Sure. I guess so. Why not?"

"Do you think I would tell you the truth?"

"It's something mean, doc. Real mean. Okay, shoot anyhow."

"I want you to have the shot first," said the doctor, straining to keep kindness and authority in his voice.

The patient looked bewildered. He glanced at the nurse, the tray, the hypodermic. Then he smiled at the doctor, but it was a smile in which fright lurked.

"All right, doctor. You're the boss."

The nurse helped him roll back his sleeve. She started to reach for the needle.

The doctor stopped her. He looked her straight in the face, his eyes focused right on hers. "No, intravenous. I'll do it. Do you understand?

She was a quick girl.

From the tray she took a short length of rubber tubing, twisted it quickly around the upper arm, just below the elbow.

The doctor watched, very quiet.

He took the arm, ran his thumb up and down the skin as he felt the vein.

"Now," said he.

She handed him the needle.

Patient, nurse and doctor all watched as the hypodermic emptied itself directly into the little ridge of the vein on the inside of the elbow.

The doctor took out the needle. He himself seemed relieved. Said he: "Feel anything?"

"Not yet, doc. Can you tell me now, doc? I can't make trouble with this stuff in me. Where's Larry? Where's Jock?"

"You weren't on a ship, young man. You were alone in a one-man craft. You didn't have a party for two days. You had it for twenty years. Larry didn't bring your ship in. The Earth authorities brought it in with telemetry. You were starved, dehydrated and nine-tenths dead. The boat had a freeze unit and you were fed by the emergency kit. You had the narrowest escape in the whole history of space travel. The boat had one of the new hypo kits. You must have had a second or two to slap it to your face before the boat took over. You didn't have any friends with you. They came out of your own mind."

"That's all right, doc. I'll be all right. Don't worry about me."

"There wasn't any Jock or Larry or Ralph or Milly. That was just the hypo kit."

"I get you, doc. It's all right. This dope you gave me, it's good stuff. I feel happy and dreamy. You can go away now and let me sleep. You can explain it all to me in the morning. But be sure to let Ralph and Jock in, when visiting hours open up." He turned on his side away from them.

The nurse pulled the cover up over his shoulders.

Then she and the doctor started to leave the room. At the last moment, she ran past the doctor and out of the room ahead of him. She did not want him to see her cry.

END

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ORPHANS OF SCIENCE

BY STEPHEN BARR

Never mind the bevatrons and the 200-inch mirrors — here are some scientific problems right at hand!

There are certain slightly mysterious facts or effects in the world about us to which scientists have, if not closed their eyes, at least turned their backs. I do not suggest that this is because these things cannot be explained, but that they are unimportant to the point of almost absurdity. Nonetheless I wish someone would take a day off from nuclear research or space exploration and do a little investigating.

As a layman I get the impression that a scientist on a postman's holiday usually tries his hand at discovering the general law of prime numbers, or daydreams about the physics of the lyre; but this is not the sort of thing I have in mind. No—I mean really unimportant things, that obviously will get us nowhere.

For example, I wish someone would explain to me why metals—other than colorless ones—have colored highlights, when nothing else has. I don't mean iridescent things like bubbles and mother-of-pearl, where the color is due to diffraction or interference, but something like copper sulphate which is an intense blue but with a white highlight, or red enamel which also has a white highlight. While it is true that a colored reflection is given off by a mirror coated with a colored substance, closer examination reveals that the external reflection, the true highlight, is invariably white. Now,

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I can easily imagine that at the angle at which the copper sulphate, say, appears blue there is penetration of the light rays which thereby re-emerge colored, while at a flatter angle there is no penetration and consequently no coloration: but why is this not so in the case of metals, where one would expect less rather than more penetration?

And speaking of whiteness, just what *is* white? I don't mean a white object: that merely means that it reflects all colors equally—but diffused—so that in red light it is red, and in white light white. What I should like to see is an objective definition of white light. It won't do just to say that it is a combination of all the colors of the visible spectrum, because that is true of most colors in nature, in varying proportions. Nor is it true that all parts of the spectrum are present in equal intensity or at equal energy: the spectral graph of white light is not a horizontal line, it is a curve with a hump in the yellow-green.

Empirically we can say that under such and such conditions all substances give off "white" light. But who is to decide when it is white? Another rather curious empirical fact is that all people who are normal or partially color-blind agree on whiteness. That is to say, sources of light can be produced about which there will be no disagreement as to its being hueless. But this again is subjective. There is, of course, something about the mere concept of huelessness that suggests objectivity, and the fact of agreement among even the partially colorblind supports this . . . but just what is white light?

This kind of feckless question constitutes a whole class, and it may be that the two examples given have answers, but they cannot be very well known as I have been asking for years with no success whatsoever.

There are two others that are almost classics and which for a long time I had thought to be unexplained, but recently found out to have been investigated and satisfactorily solved. I refer to the droplets that form in a glass of whiskey just above the level of the liquid and creep down only to pull back nervously, and the well-known pool-table trick—it can also be done with coins—of putting a line of balls along a cushion and rolling one, two or more balls in a group against the end of the line, whereupon the same number of balls bounces out from the other end. One ball rolled as hard as you please will knock out one, and only one; but a group of three, even when gently rolled, will knock out three. It now appears that both these phenomena are quite well understood and not in any way mysterious—but just the same they belong in the above category.

As an example of the so-far ignored cases—so far as I know—but in a less physical field, it has long puzzled me that I should have the feeling that streaks of vertically falling raindrops appear slanted when I look out of a moving train, while the telegraph poles do not. When I ask people about this they give me a

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funny look and say that obviously, since the resultant of the rain's motion down and mine across is a diagonal, a diagonal is what I will see. I then say, yes, but how about a drop that is immediately in line with, or next to, the edge of a vertical pole: the pole is and looks vertical, and the course taken by the drop coincides with it? How can it appear to slant if the pole does not, and if it did appear vertical, what of the drops near to it? I get another funny look and my audience moves away.

Not always, I must admit; for I once asked this question of the late A. N. Whitehead and he didn't give me a funny look and nor did he move away. He smiled his Fra Angelico smile and launched into a discourse so abtruse and, to me, incomprehensible that it was I that had the funny look. However, when he had done, Professor Whitehead wandered over to the window and looked out at the rain.

Also I have asked why is it that a mirror reverses me from left to right, but not from top to bottom. There are varying reactions to this one, all of which lead nowhere except to eventual impatience. This is how it usually goes: I ask my question and the man says, "Well, think of it this way: your reflected head is opposite your real head, the feet opposite the feet, hand with ring opposite your hand with ring, and so on. Everything symmetrical. Okay now?"

"Not okay," I reply. "I'm still reversed left to right and I'm not standing on my head. How does the mirror do it.?"

"That, my dear sir, is not a function of the mirror: It has to do with a purely arbitrary notion about yourself and right-handedness."

"Well, how about a piece of writing?" I go on. "It's no good saying it isn't really reversed, because you can't read it, and it isn't upside down."

A crafty look comes over his face at this point. "What the mirror has really done," he says, "is to reverse it from *back to front* only. The same thing would happen if you held the paper up to the light and tried to read *through* it, and that is a symmetrical reversal. Say you have the paper facing you and you turn it around horizontally, then the writing will appear reversed left to right, but if you turn it around vertically it will be upside down!"

I shake my head: "When I walk over to the mirror I don't do either to myself, and yet the mirror invariably does it for me, and always left to right." It is usually here that my interlocutor's eyes glaze over, and he looks at the mirror over the bar and frowns at his tie.

Then again there is a phenomenon so well known as to be banal, yet I find it totally inexplicable. I noticed it when I was nine and we were living in England. A lady took the house nearest us one summer, and proceeded to give voice lessons. It was highly disconcerting, and my mother shut the windows. The trouble was that as well as stifling we heard the sound, still, although the house was 100 yards away. When my father got home, Mother told

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him, and he went over to our neighbor. He was a man of great tact and blandishment, she at once shut *her* windows, and we no longer heard anything—*even with our windows open.*

Now, her walls and windows were like ours, and by convenient coincidence her house was just the same distance from ours as ours was from hers. Let us say that shutting the windows diminished the sound-with-windows-open by 90 per cent: then 10 per cent was delivered to us—too small to hear. But shutting *ours* gives the same result—10 per cent—and we heard it loud as loud. Mother asked my father how come? and he gave various explanations—he was an engineer—but they were all easily disposed of, particularly by my brother, who is now a mathematician. I still worry about it.

Some of these gambits are best offered to a pair of scientists together, for they sometimes take opposite sides and the entertainment is consequently doubled. I have one that is a bit macabre, and although very unlikely to arise in actual practice, is of certain interest. I won't go into details, but I advise the reader to try it on two doctors, if he happens to know two and can get them together.

A man, versed in all the medical skills, is alone on an island from which he knows he will be rescued, but not quite soon enough to avoid starving to death. There is water to drink, and Swiss-Family-Robinson-wise the man has all the necessary drugs and instruments for a surgical operation. The question is this: can he prolong his life by eating part of himself? Or will the untoward results, such as shock, offset any advantage thereby gained?

I have heard some extremely interesting colloquies arising out of this question; always carefully polite, never heated, but also never conclusive. There is a great deal of calling each other Doctor . . . but I've yet to hear the answer.

To turn to something more in the nature of lab work: I have discovered—I'm sure I can't be the sole observer—an effect produced with a very hot skillet and a small amount of water, that I shall call the Barr Effect until some other claimant comes along. I can scarcely imagine anything more useless, but I wish I knew the reason for it. You have to have a heavy cast-metal pot—the lower half of a pressure cooker is perfect—the bottom of which must be exactly flat or if, as is common, slightly warped, it must be concave rather than convex. Heat this on a gas ring until a drop of water put in it exhibits the spheroidal state, and continue to heat. The water, of course, has been darting about and playing tag with itself. At a certain higher temperature somewhat short of red heat, a tablespoonful of water will, on coming into contact with the hot pan, not hiss but move sinuously about, assuming various amoeboid shapes.

Where it had earlier been inclined to split up into several small spheres, it will now remain in one flat piece. After awhile, during which it gets gradually smaller and the heat is still being supplied, it becomes

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quasi-elliptical in outline, but oscillates by shortening its major axis and getting wider until the minor axis becomes the major, and then back again. This is done fairly fast and looks like this:

Figure 1

But as it continues to decrease in size the motions become quicker and quicker until the eye sees a kind of miniature cross in the form of intersecting footballs, about half an inch across, like this.

Figure 2

Soon it gives a twitch and becomes circular and with a slight fuzziness to its outline, but directly changes to the shape of a cookie with scalloped edges—always eight scallops:

Figure 3

If you look close you can see a sort of quivering, or internal shimmy, and then it suddenly begins to rotate faster and faster and gradually shrinks away and disappears. What's going on here, I should like to know—?

The reason you have to have a flat or slightly concave pan is that otherwise the original tablespoon of water will lie along the side and just move backwards and forwards and get smaller. That is what happened when I tried to show the effect to a scientific friend, and I think he still believes I was trying to have him on.

It was his wife's pressure cooker, too. END

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ALL WE MARSMEN

BY PHILIP K. DICK

ILLUSTRATED BY FINLAY

SECOND PART

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Mars was virgin territory, ready to enrich those who would despoil it—and the spoilers were on their way!

What Has Gone Before . . .

Jack Bohlen was a general handyman, and thus on Mars a member of one of the most valued of trades. Mars had to make do or do without. It was still an outpost, and the freight rates from Earth made even a necessity a luxury, and made luxuries almost a crime.

But to Arnie Kott, powerful and hardfisted leader of the union town of Lewistown, luxury was only his due. Arnie took what he wanted. The best handyman, like Bohlen; the most beautiful girl, like Doreen Anderton; the wealth and power that was ripe for anyone to pluck.

To Arnie Kott had been born a son, a strange child who lived in a colony of strange children at the Israeli settlement on Mars. Through the boy and the psychiatrist in charge of those unfortunate youngsters, Dr. Milton Glaub, Arnie learned of the existence of certain types of abnormality that went beyond anything in the textbooks. They represented, to Arnie, a hope for still greater wealth and power. For he thought he knew how to put these strange children to work for him.

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XII

On his journey by 'copter to Lewistown to meet Arnie Kott and have a drink with him, Doctor Milton Glaub asked himself if his good luck were true. I can't believe it, he thought, a turning point in my life like this.

He was not certain what Arnie wanted. The phone call had been so unexpected and Arnie had talked so fast that Doctor Glaub wound up perplexed, knowing only that it had to do with parapsychological aspects of the mentally ill. Well, he could tell Arnie practically all there was to know on that topic. And yet, Glaub sensed that there was something deeper in the inquiry.

Generally, a concern with schizophrenia was a symptom of the person's own inner struggle in that area.

Now, it was a fact that often the first signs of the insidious growth of the schizophrenic process in a person was an inability to eat in public. Arnie had noisily gabbed on about his desire to meet Glaub — not in his own home or in the doctor's office — but at a well-known bar and restaurant in Lewistown, the Willows. Was this perhaps a reaction-formation? Mysteriously made tense by public situations, and especially by those involving the nutritive function. Arnie Kott was leaning over backward to regain the normalcy which was beginning to leave him.

Piloting his 'copter, Glaub thought about this, but then, by slow and stealthy stages, his thinking returned to his own problems.

Arnie Kott, a man controlling a multi-million dollar union fund; a prominent person in the colonial world, although virtually unknown back Home. A feudal baron, virtually.

If Kott were to put me on his staff, Glaub speculated, I could pay off all the debts we've piled up, those hideous charge-account bills at twenty per cent interest that just seem to loom there always, never getting smaller or going away. And then we could start over, not go into debt, live within our means . . . and a highly expanded means, at that.

Then, too, old Arnie was a Swede or a Dane, something like that, and it wouldn't be necessary for Glaub to season his skin-color before receiving each patient. Plus the fact that Arnie had a reputation for informality. Milt and Arnie, it would be. Doctor Glaub smiled.

What he had to be sure to do in this initial interview was to ratify Arnie's concepts. Sort of play along. Not dash cold water on things — even if, say, old Arnie's notions were way out of line. A hell of a thing it would be to discourage the man! That wasn't right.

I see your point, Arnie, Doctor Glaub said to himself, practicing away as he piloted his 'copter closer and closer to Lewistown. Yes, there is a good deal to be said for that worldview.

He had handled so many types of social situations for his patients, appearing in public for them, representing those timid, shut-in schizoid personalities who shrank from interpersonal exposure, that this would undoubtedly be a snap. And, if the

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schizophrenic process in Arnie were beginning to bring up its heavy artillery — Arnie might need to lean on him for his very survival.

Hot dog, Doctor Glaub said to himself, and increased the velocity of the 'copter to its maximum.

Around the Willows ran a moat of cold blue water. Fountains sprayed water into the air, and bougainvillaea, purple and amber and rusty-red, grew to great heights, encircling the single-story glass structure. As he descended the black wrought-iron staircase from the parking lot, Doctor Glaub perceived his party within: Arnie Kott seated with a stunning redhead and a nondescript male companion wearing repairman's overalls and canvas shirt.

True classless society here, Doctor Glaub reflected.

A rainbow style bridge assisted him in his crossing of the moat. Doors opened before him; he entered the lounge, passed by the bar, halted to sniff in the sight of the jazz combo composing meditatively and then hailed Arnie. "Hi, Arnie!"

"Hi, Doc," Arnie rose to introduce him. "Dor, this is Doc Glaub. Doreen Anderton. This is my repairman, Jack Bohlen, a real fireballer. Jack, this is the foremost living psychiatrist, Milt Glaub."

They all nodded and shook hands.

"Hardly 'foremost,'" Glaub murmured, as they sat down. "It's still the Swiss at Bergholzlei, the existential psychiatrists, who dominate the field." But he was deeply gratified, untrue as the announcement was. He could feel his face flushing with pleasure. "Sorry it took me so long to get here. I had to dash over to New Israel. Bos — Bosley Touvim — needed my advice on a medical matter which he considered pressing."

"Quite a guy, that Bos," Arnie said. He had lit a cigar, a genuine Earth-rolled Optimo *admiral*. "A real go-getter. But let's get down to business. Wait, I'll get you a drink." He looked inquiringly at Glaub, waving the cocktail waitress over.

"Scotch, if you have it," Glaub said.

"Cutty Sark, sir," the girl said.

"Oh, fine. No ice, please."

"Okay," Arnie said impatiently. "Now look, Doc. You got the name of a really advanced schizo for me, or not?" He scrutinized Glaub.

"Uh," Glaub said, and then he recalled his visit to New Israel not more than a short while ago. "Manfred Steiner," he said.

"Any relation to Norbert Steiner?"

"As a matter of fact, his boy. At Camp B-G. I imagine there's no breach of confidence in telling you. Totally autistic from birth. Mother the cold, intellectual schizoid personality, doing it by the rule-book. Father—"

"Father dead," Arnie said shortly.

"Right. Very regrettable. Nice chap, but depressive. It was suicide, you know. Typical impulse during his low-swing, a wonder he didn't do it years ago."

Arnie said, "You told me on the phone you've got a theory about the schizophrenic being out of phase in time."

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"Yes, it's a derangement in interior time-sense." Doctor Glaub had all three of them listening, and he warmed to his topic; it was his favorite. "We have yet to get total experimental verification, but that will come." And then, without hesitation or shame, he passed off the Bergholzlei theory as his own.

Evidently much impressed, Arnie said, "Very interesting." To the repairman Jack Bohlen he said, "Could such slow-motion chambers be built?"

"No doubt," Jack murmured.

"And sensors," Glaub said. "To get the patient out of the chamber and into the real world. Sight, hearing—"

"It could be done," Bohlen said.

"How about this," Arnie said impatiently and enthusiastically. "Could the schizophrenic be running so fast, compared to us, in time, that he's actually in what to us is the future? Would that account for his precognition?" His light-colored eyes glittered excitedly.

Glaub shrugged in a manner indicating agreement.

Turning to Bohlen, Arnie stuttered, "Hey, Jack, that's it! Goddam it, I ought to be a psychiatrist. Slow him down, hell! Speed him up, I say. Let him live out of phase in time, if he wants to. But let's get him to share his perceptions with us. Right, Bohlen?"

Glaub said, "Now there is the rub. In autism especially, the faculty of inter-personal communication is drastically impaired."

"I see," Arnie said, but he was not daunted. "Hell, I know enough about that to see a way out. Didn't that early guy, Carl Jung — didn't he manage to decode the schizophrenic's language years ago?"

"Yes," Glaub said, "decades ago Jung cracked the private language of the schizophrenic. But in child autism, as with Manfred, there is no language at all. At least no spoken language. Possibly totally personal private thoughts. . .but no words."

Arnie spoke one personal, private word. The girl glanced at him admonishingly.

"This is a serious matter," Arnie said to her. "We've got to get these unfortunates, these autistic kids, to talk to us and tell us what they know. Isn't that right, Doc?"

"Yes," Glaub said.

"That kid's an orphan now," Arnie said, "that Manfred."

"Well, he has the mother, still," Glaub said.

Waving his hand excitedly, Arnie said, "But they don't care enough about the kid to have him at home. They junked him in that camp. Hell, I'll spring him and bring him here. And Jack, you get on this and engineer a machine to make contact with him. You see the picture?"

After a moment Bohlen said, "I don't know what to say." He laughed briefly.

"Sure you know what to say. Hell, it ought to be easy for you! You're a schizophrenic yourself, like you said."

Glaub, interested, said to Bohlen, "Is that the case?" He had already automatically noted the repairman's skeletal tension as he sat sipping his

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drink, and the rigid musculature, not to mention the asthenic build. "But you appear to have made enormous strides toward recovery."

Raising his head, Bohlen met his glance, saying, "I'm totally recovered. For many years, now." His face was affect-laden.

No one makes a total recovery, Glaub thought. But he did not say it.

Instead he said, "Perhaps Arnie is right. You could empathize with the autistic, whereas that is our basic problem. The autistic can't take our roles, see the world as we do, and we can't take his role either. So a gulf separates us."

"Bridge that gulf, Jack!" Arnie cried. He whacked Bohlen on the back. "That's your job; I'm putting you on the payroll."

Envy filled Doctor Glaub. He glared down at his drink, hiding his reaction. The girl, however, saw it and smiled at him. He did not smile back.

Contemplating Doctor Glaub sitting opposite him, Jack Bohlen felt the gradual diffusion of his perception which he so dreaded, the change in his awareness which had so attacked him years ago in the personnel manager's office at Corona Corporation, and which always seemed still with him, just on the edge.

He saw the psychiatrist under the aspect of absolute reality: a thing composed of cold wire and switches, not a human at all, not made of flesh. The fleshy trappings melted and became transparent, and Jack Bohlen saw the mechanical device beyond. Yet he did not let his terrible state of awareness show. He continued to nurse his drink. He went on listening to the conversation and nodding occasionally. Neither Doctor Glaub nor Arnie Kott noticed.

But the girl did. She leaned over and said softly in Jack's ear, "Aren't you feeling well?"

He shook his head. No, he was saying. I'm not feeling well.

"Let's get away from them," the girl whispered. "I can't stand it either." Aloud, to Arnie, she said, "Jack and I are going to leave you two alone. Come on." She tapped Jack on the arm and rose to her feet; he felt her light, strong fingers, and he, too, rose.

Arnie said, "Don't be gone long," and resumed his earnest conversation with Doctor Glaub.

"Thanks," Jack said, as they walked up the aisle, between tables.

Doreen said, "Did you see how jealous he was, when Arnie said he was putting you on the payroll?"

"No. Glaub?" But he was not surprised. "I get this way," he said to the girl, by way of apology. "Something to do with my eyes. It may be astigmatism. Due to tension."

The girl said, "Do you want to sit at the bar? Or go outside?"

"Outside," Jack said.

Presently they stood on the rainbow bridge, over the water. In the water fish slid about, luminous and vague, half-real beings as rare on Mars as any form of matter conceivable. They were a miracle in this world, and Jack and the girl, gazing

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down, both felt it. And both knew they felt this same thought without having to speak it aloud.

"It's nice out here," Doreen said finally.

"Yeah." He did not want to talk.

"Everybody," Doreen said, "has at one time or another known a schizophrenic . . . if they're not one themselves. It was my brother, back Home. My younger brother."

Jack said, "I'm okay now."

"But you're not," Doreen said.

"No," he admitted, "but what the hell can I do? You said it yourself. Once a schizophrenic, always a schizophrenic." He was silent, then, concentrating on the gliding, pale fish.

"Arnie thinks a lot of you," the girl said. "When he says his talent is judging the value of people he's telling the truth. He can see already that that Glaub is desperately eager to sell himself and get on the staff, here in Lewistown. I guess psychiatry doesn't pay any more. Too many in the business, maybe. There are twenty of them here in this settlement already, and none do a genuinely good traffic. Didn't your — condition cause you trouble when you applied for permission to emigrate?"

He said, "I don't want to talk about it, please."

"Let's walk," the girl said.

They worked along the street, past the shops, most of which had closed for the day.

"What was it you saw," the girl said, "when you looked at Doctor Glaub, there at the table?"

Jack said, "Nothing."

"You'd rather not say about that either."

"That's right."

"Do you think if you tell me things will get worse?"

"It's not things. It's me."

"Maybe it is the things," Doreen said. "Maybe there is something in your vision, however distorted and garbled it's become. I don't know. I used to try like hell to comprehend what it was Clay — my brother — saw and heard. He couldn't say. I know that his world was absolutely different from the rest of ours, in the family. He killed himself, like Steiner did." She had paused at a newsstand, to look over the item, on page one, about Norbert Steiner. "The existential psychiatrists often say to let them go ahead and take their lives. It's the only way for some of them . . . the vision becomes too awful to bear."

Jack said nothing.

"Is it awful?" Doreen asked.

"No. Just disconcerting." He struggled to explain. "There's no way you can work it in with what you're supposed to see and know. It makes it impossible to go on in the accustomed way."

"Don't you very often try to pretend, and sort of —go along with it by acting? Like an actor?" When he did not answer, she said, "You tried to do that in there, just now."

"I'd love to fool everybody," he conceded. "I'd give anything if I could go on acting it out, playing a role. But that's a real split. There's no split up until then; they're wrong when they say it's a split in the mind.

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If I wanted to keep going entire, without a split, I'd have to lean over and say to Doctor Glaub—" He broke off.

"Tell me," the girl said.

"Well," he said, taking a deep breath, "I'd say, Doc, I can see you under the aspect of eternity and you're dead. That's the substance of the sick, morbid vision. I don't want it; I didn't ask for it."

The girl put her arm within his.

"I never told anybody before," Jack said, "not even Silvia, my wife, or my son David. You know, I watch him. I look every day to be sure it isn't showing up in him, too. It's so easy for this stuff to get passed along, as with the Steiners. I didn't know they had a boy at B-G until Glaub said so. And they're neighbors of ours for years back. Steiner never let it out."

Doreen said, "We're supposed to go back to the Willows for dinner. Do you want to? I think it would be a good idea. You know, you don't have to join Arnie's staff; you can stay with Mr. Yee. That's a nice 'copter you have. You don't have to give all that up just because Arnie decides he can use you. Maybe you can't use him."

Shrugging, he said, "It's an interesting challenge, building a conduit for communication between an autistic child and our world. I think there's a lot in what Arnie says. I could be the intermediary. I could do a useful job there." It doesn't really matter why Arnie wants to bring out the Steiner boy, he realized. Probably he's got some solid, selfish motive that will bring him a profit in cold hard cash. I certainly couldn't care less.

In fact I can have it both ways, he realized. Mr. Yee can lease me to the Water Workers' Union; I'd be paid by Mr. Yee and he'd be paid by Arnie. Everyone would be happy, and why not? Tinkering with the broken, malfunctioning mind of a child certainly has more to recommend it than tinkering with refrigerators and encoders. If the child is suffering some of the visions that I know—

He knew the time-theory which Glaub had trotted out as his own. He had read about it in the space-mail edition of *Scientific American;* naturally, he read anything on schizophrenia that he could get his hands on. He knew that it had originated with the Swiss, that Glaub hadn't invented it. What an odd theory it is, he thought to himself. And yet, it rings true.

"Let's go back to the Willows," he said. He was very hungry, and it would no doubt be a bang-up meal.

Doreen said, "You're a brave person, Jack Bohlen."

"Why?" he asked.

"Because you're going back to the place that troubled you, to the people that brought on your vision of, as you said, eternity. I wouldn't do that. I'd flee."

"But," he said, "that's the whole point. It's designed to make you flee. The vision's for that purpose, to nullify your relations with other people, to isolate you. If it's successful, your life with human beings is over. That's what they mean when they say the

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term schizophrenia isn't a diagnosis. It's a prognosis. It doesn't say anything about what you have, only about how you'll wind up." *And I'm not going to wind up like that,* he said to himself. Like Manfred Steiner, mute and in an institution; I intend to keep my job, my wife and son, my friendships — he glanced at the girl holding onto his arm. Yes, and even love-affairs, if such there be.

I intend to keep trying.

Putting his hands in his pockets as he walked along, he touched something small, cold and hard; lifting it out in surprise, he saw it was a wrinkled little object like a tree root.

"What in the world's that?" Doreen asked him.

It was the water witch which the Bleekmen had given him that morning, out on the desert. He had forgotten, all about it.

"A good luck charm," Jack said to the girl.

Shivering, she said, "It's awfully ugly."

"Yes," he agreed, "but it's friendly. And we do have this problem, we schizophrenics. We do pick up other people's unconscious hostility."

"I know. The telepathic factor. Clay had it worse and worse until—" She glanced at him. "The paranoid outcome."

"It's the worst thing about our condition, this awareness of the buried, repressed sadism and aggression in others around us, even strangers. I wish to hell we didn't have it. We even pick it up from people in restaurants." He thought of Glaub. "In buses, in a theater. Crowds."

Doreen said, "Do you have any idea what Arnie wants to learn from the Steiner boy?"

"Well, this theory about precognition—"

"But what does Arnie want to know about the future? You have no idea, do you? And it would never occur to you to try to find out."

That was it. He had never even been curious.

"You're content," she said slowly, scrutinizing him, "merely to do your technical task of rigging up the essential machinery. That's not right, Jack Bohlen. That's not a good sign at all."

"Oh," he said. He nodded. "It's very schizophrenic, I guess . . . to be content with a purely technical relationship."

"Will you ask Arnie?"

He felt uncomfortable. "It's his business, not mine. It's an interesting job and I like Arnie, I prefer him to Mr. Yee. I just haven't got it in me to pry. That's the way I am."

"I think you're afraid. But I don't see why. You're brave, and yet in some deep way you're terribly, terribly frightened."

"Maybe so," he said, feeling sad.

Together, they walked on back to the Willows.

That night, after everyone had gone, including Doreen Anderton, Arnie Kott sat alone in his living room gloating. What a day it had been.

He had snared a good repairman who had already repaired his invalu-

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able encoder and who was going to build an electronic whing-ding to tap the precog faculties of an autistic child.

He had milked, for nothing, the information he needed from a psychiatrist, and then managed to get rid of the psychiatrist.

So all in all it was an exceptional day. It left only two problems: his harpsichord was still untuned and — what the hell else? It had slipped his mind. He pondered as he sat before his TV set, watching the fights from America the Beautiful, the U.S.A. colony on Mars.

Then he remembered. Norb Steiner's death. There was no source of goodies any more.

"I'll fix that," Arnie said aloud. He shut off the TV and got his encoder out. Seated before it, mike in hand, he delivered a message. It was to Scott Temple, with whom he had worked on countless important business ventures; Temple was a cousin of Ed Rockingham, and a good egg to know — he had managed, through a charter arrangement with the UN, to gain control of most of the medical supplies entering Mars, and what a top-notch monopoly that amounted to!

The drums of the encoder turned encouragingly.

"Scott!" Arnie said. "How 're you? Hey, you know that poor guy Norb Steiner? Too bad, I mean, his dying and all. I understand he was mentally you-know-what. Like the rest of us." Arnie laughed at that long and hard. "So anyhow, it leaves us with a little problem; I mean, one of procurement. Right? So listen, Scott, old man. I'd like to talk it over with you. I'm in. You get me? Stop by here in around a day or two, so we can work out the exact arrangements. I think we should forget the gear that Steiner was using. We'll start out fresh, get our own little bitty field off in an out-of-the-way place, our own slave rockets, whatever else we need. Keep those smoked oysters rolling in, like they ought to." He shut the machine off and tried to think if there was more. No, he had said it all. Between him and a man like Scott Temple, no more had to be said, it was a deal then and there. "Okay, Scott, boy," he said. "I'll expect to see you."

After he had removed the spool it occurred to him to play it back just to be *sure* it had gone into code. God, what a calamity if by some freak chance it came out in clear!

But it was in code, all right, and his dearest: the machine had put the semantic units into a catfight-like parody of contemporary electronic music. Arnie, hearing the whistles, growls, beeps, hoots, hums, laughed until tears ran down his cheeks; he had to go off to the bathroom and slap cold water on his face to stop himself.

Then, back at the encoder, he carefully marked the box into which the spool went:

Song of the Wind Spirit 1
A Cantata
By Karl Williams Dittershand

That composer, Karl Williams Dittershand, was the current favorite back on Earth among the intellec-

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tuals, and Arnie detested the man's electronic so-called music. He was a purist himself; his tastes stopped firmly at Brahms. Arnie had a good laugh at the idea of marking his encoded message proposing his and Scott's going into the black-market importation of foodstuffs as a cantata by Dittershand, and then rang up a union Goodmember to convey the spool up north to Nova Britannica, the U.K. colony on Mars.

That, at eight-thirty in the evening, wound up the business of the day, and Arnie returned to his TV set to see the finish to the fights. He lit himself another Optimo extra-mild *admiral* and relaxed.

I wish all days could be like this, he said to himself. I could live forever if they were. Days like this made him younger, not older. He felt as if he could see forty come by again.

Imagine me going into the black market, he said to himself. And for little stuff, little tins of wild blackberry jelly and slices of pickled eel and lox. But that was vital, too. For him especially. Nobody is going to rob me of my treats, he thought grimly. If that Steiner thought by killing himself he could cut me off where it hurts—

"Come on," he urged the colored boy taking a licking on the TV screen. "Get up and give it to him."

As if he had heard, the Negro fighter scrambled back up, and Arnie chuckled with deep pleasure.

In his small hotel room, where he traditionally stayed weekend nights in Bunchewood Park, Jack Bohlen sat by the window smoking a cigarette and pondering what the day's developments meant.

It had returned, after all these years, that which he dreaded; he had to face it. Now it was not anguished anticipation, it was actuality. Christ, he thought miserably, they're right. Once you have it you've got it for keeps. The visit to the Public School had set him up for it, and at the Willows it had appeared and smitten him, as intact and full as if he were in his twenties again, back on Earth, working for Corona Corporation down in Redwood City.

And I know, he thought, that Norbert Steiner's death figured into it. Death upset everyone, made them do peculiar things. It set a radiating process of action and emotion going that worked its way out, farther and farther, to embrace more people and things.

Better call Silvia, he thought, and see how she's making out with Frau Steiner and the children.

But he shrank from it. There's nothing I can do to help anyhow, he decided. I have to be on twenty-four hour call here in town, where Mr. Yee's switchboard can get hold of me. And now, too, he has to be available to Arnie Kott at Lewistown.

There had been, however, compensation. A fine, deep, subtle, highly invigorating compensation. In his wallet he had Doreen Anderton's address and phone number.

Should he call her tonight? Imagine, he thought, finding someone, and a woman, too, with whom he could talk freely, who understood

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about his situation, who genuinely wanted to hear and was not frightened.

It helped a lot.

His wife was the last person in the world he could talk to about his schizophrenia. On the few occasions he had tried she had simply collapsed with fear. Like everybody else, Silvia was terrified at the idea of it entering her life; she herself warded it off with the magic charms of drugs ... as if phenobarbital could halt the most pervasive, ominous psychic process known to man. God knew how many pills he himself had swallowed during the last decade. Enough to pave a road from his home to this hotel and possibly back.

He decided after some reflection not to call Doreen. Better to leave it as a way out when the going got exceptionally rough. Right now he felt fairly placid. There would be plenty of time in the future, and plenty of need, to seek out Doreen Anderton.

Of course, he would have to be incredibly c a r e f u l; obviously Doreen was Arnie Kott's mistress. But she seemed to know what she was doing, and certainly she knew Arnie. She must have taken him into account when she gave out her phone number and address, and, for that matter, when she got up and left the restaurant.

I trust her, Jack said to himself. and for someone with a streak of schizophrenia, that is something.

Pondering that, Jack Bohlen put out his cigarette, went and got his pajamas, and prepared to go to bed.

He was just getting under the covers when the phone in his room rang. A service call, he thought, leaping up automatically to get it.

But it was not. A woman's voice said softly in his ear. "Jack?"

"Yes," he said.

"This is Doreen. I just wondered if you were okay."

"I'm fine," he said, seating himself on the edge of the bed.

"Do you think you'd want to come over tonight?"

He hesitated. "Umm," he said.

"We could play records and talk. Arnie lent me a lot of rare old stereophonic LP records from his collection. Some of them are awfully scratchy, but some are terrific. He's quite a collector, you know. He has the largest collection of Bach on Mars. You saw his harpsichord."

So that's what that had been, there in Arnie's living room.

"Is it safe?" he asked.

"Yes. Don't worry about Arnie. He's not possessive, if you know what I mean."

Jack said, "Okay. I'll be over." And then he realized that he couldn't, because he had to be available for service calls. Unless he could switch through her phone.

"That's no problem," she said, when he explained it to her. "I'll call Arnie and tell him."

Dumbfounded, he said, "But—"

"Jack, you're out of your mind if you think we can do it any other way. Arnie knows everything that goes on in the settlement. Leave it up to me, dear. I'll call him right now. And you come right on over here. If any calls come through while

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you're on your way I'll write them down, but I don't think there will be any. Arnie doesn't want you out fixing people's toasters, he wants you for his own jobs, for making that machine for talking to the Steiner boy."

"Okay," he said, "I'll be over. Good-by." He hung up the phone.

Ten minutes later he was on his way, flying the bright and shiny Yee Company repairship through the night sky of Mars, to Lewistown and Arnie Kott's mistress.

XIV

David Bohlen knew that his grandfather Leo had a lot of money and didn't mind spending it. For instance, before they had even left the rocket terminal building the old man stopped at the flower counter and bought the boy's mother a bunch of large blue Earth flowers. And he wanted to buy something for David, too, but they didn't have any toys, only candy, which Grandfather Leo bought: a two-pound box.

Under his arm Grandfather Leo had a white carton tied with string. He hadn't let the rocketship officials take it and put it with the luggage. When they had left the terminal building and were in his dad's 'copter, Grandfather Leo opened the package. It was full of Jewish rye bread and pickles and thin-sliced corned beef wrapped in protective plastic.

"My gosh," Jack exclaimed in delight. "All the way from New York! You can't get that out here in the colonies, Dad."

"I know that, Jack," Grandfather said. "A fella told me where to get it, and I like it so much I knew you'd like it. You and I have the same tastes." He chuckled, pleased to see how happy he had made them. "I'm gonna make you a sandwich when we get to the house. First thing we get there."

The 'copter rose now above the rocketship terminal and passed on over the dark desert.

"How's the weather you been having here?" Grandfather Leo asked.

"Lots of storms," Jack said. "Practically buried us a week ago. We had to rent power equipment to dig out."

"Bad," Grandfather Leo said. "You ought to get that cement wall up, you were talking about in your letters."

"It costs a fortune to have construction work done out here," Silvia said. "It's not like back on Earth."

"I know that," Grandfather Leo said, "but you got to protect your investment. That house is worth a lot. And the land. You have water nearby; don't forget that."

"How could we forget that?" Silvia said. "Good lord, without the ditch we'd die."

"That canal any wider this year?" Grandfather Leo asked.

"Just the same," Jack said.

David spoke up. "They dredged it, Grandfather Leo. I watched them. The UN men used a big machine that sucked up the sand from the bottom, and the water's a lot cleaner. So my dad shut off the filter system, and now when the rider comes and opens the gate our way,

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we can pump it so fast that my dad let me put in a whole new vegetable garden I can water with overflow. I have corn and squash and a couple of carrots, but something ate all the beets. We had corn last night from it. We put up a fence to keep those little animals from getting in. What are they called, Dad?"

"Sand rats, Leo," Jack said. "As soon as David's garden started to bear, the sand rats moved in. They're yay long." He held up his hands to show. "Harmless, except that they can eat their weight in ten minutes. The older settlers warned us, but we had to try."

"Good to grow your own produce," Grandfather Leo said. "Yeah, you wrote me about the garden, son. I'd like to see it tomorrow. Tonight I'm tired. That's a long trip I took, even with the new ships they got, what do they call it? Fast as light. But it really isn't; still a lot of time taking off and landing and a lot of confusion. I had a woman next to me, she was terrified. Thought we'd burn up, it got so hot inside there, even with the air conditioning. I don't know why they let it get so hot. They certainly charge enough. But it's a big improvement over remember the ship you took when you emigrated years ago. Two months!"

Jack said, "Leo, you brought your oxygen mask, I hope. Ours is too old now. It's unreliable."

"Sure, I got it in my brown suitcase. Don't worry about me. I can take this atmosphere. I got a different heart pill, really improved. Everything's improving back Home. Of course, it's overcrowded. But more and more people going to be emigrating over here . . . . take my word for that. Smog's so bad back Home it nearly kills you."

David spoke up, "Grandfather Leo, the man next door, Mr. Steiner, he took his own life and now his son Manfred is home from the camp for anomalous children. And my dad is building a mechanism so he can talk to us."

"Well," Grandfather Leo said in a kindly way. He beamed at the boy. "That's interesting. David. How old is this boy?"

"Ten," David said. "But he can't talk at all to us, yet. But my dad is going to fix that up with his mechanism, and you know what my dad is working for right now? Mr. Kott, who runs the Water Workers' Union and their settlement. He's really a big important man."

"I believe I heard about him," Grandfather Leo said, with a wink at Jack which the boy caught.

Jack said to his father, "Dad, are you still going ahead with this business of buying land in the F.D.R. Range?"

"Oh, certainly," Grandfather Leo said. "You bet your life, Jack. Naturally, I came out on this trip sociably, to see you all, but I couldn't have taken off so much time as this unless it was business too."

"I hoped you'd given that up," Jack said.

"Now, Jack," Grandfather Leo said, "don't you worry. You let me worry if I'm doing the right thing, I been in land investment for many years now. Listen. You going to

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pilot me out there to that mountain range so I can take a first-hand look? I got a lot of maps. I want to see with my own eyes, though."

"You're going to be disappointed when you see it," Silvia said. "It's so desolate there, no water, nothing scarcely living."

"Let's not worry about it right now," Grandfather Leo said, with a smile at David. He nudged the boy in the ribs. "Good to see a young man straight and healthy out here, away from the polluted air we have back Home."

"Well, Mars has its drawbacks," Silvia said. "Try living with bad water or no water at all for a while and you'll see."

"I know," Grandfather Leo said soberly. "You people sure have guts to live out here. But it's healthy. Don't forget that."

Below, now, the lights of Bunchewood Park glittered. Jack turned the 'copter toward the north and their home.

As he piloted the Yee Company 'copter, Jack Bohlen glanced at his father and marveled at how little he had aged, how vigorous and well-knit Leo looked, for a man in his late seventies. And still at his job, full time. Getting as much enjoyment out of speculating as ever.

And yet, although it did not show, he was certain that the long trip from Earth had tired Leo out more than he admitted. In any case, they were almost at the house. The gyrocompass reading was point 7.08054; they were only minutes away.

When they had parked on the hardstand, Leo at once fulfilled his promise, In the kitchen he set to work, joyfully making each of them a Kosher corned-beef sandwich. Soon they were all seated in the living room, eating, everyone peaceful and relaxed.

"You just don't know how we're starved for food of this sort," Silvia said finally. "Even on the black market." She glanced at Jack.

"Sometimes you can pick up delicatessen foods on the black market," Jack said, "although lately it's gotten harder. We don't, personally. No moral reason. It's just too expensive."

They talked for a while, finding out about Leo's trip and about conditions back Home. David was sent to bed at ten-thirty. At eleven Silvia excused herself and went to bed, too. Leo and Jack were left in the living room, still sitting, just the two of them.

Leo said, "Can we step outside and take a glance at the boy's garden? You got a big flashlight?"

Finding his trouble-lantern, Jack led the way out of the house and into the cold night air.

As they stood at the edge of the patch of corn, Leo said to him in a low voice, "How are you and Silvia getting along, these days?"

"Fine," Jack said, a little taken aback by the question.

"Seems to me there's a coolness between the two of you," Leo said. "It sure would be terrible, Jack, if you grew apart. That's a fine woman you got there. One in a million."

"I recognize that," Jack said uncomfortably.

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"Back Home," Leo said, "when you were a young fellow, you always played around a lot. But I know you're settled down now."

"I am," Jack said. "You're imagining things."

"You do seem withdrawn, Jack," his father said. "I hope that old trouble of yours, you know what I mean, isn't bothering you. I'm talking about—"

"I know what you're talking about!"

Relentlessly, Leo went on, "When I was a boy there was no mental illness like there is now. It's a sign of the times; too many people, too much overcrowding. I remember when you first got sick, and a long time before that, say from when you were seventeen on, you were cold toward other people. Uninterested in them. Moody, too. Seems to me you're like that, now."

Jack glared at his father. This was the trouble with having one's folks visit. They could never resist the temptation to resume their old roles as the All-wise, the All-knowing. To Leo, Jack was not a grown man with a wife and child. He was simply his son Jack.

"Look, Leo," Jack said. "Out here there are very few people. This is a sparsely-settled planet as yet. Naturally people here are less gregarious. They have to be more inner-directed than back Home where it's like you said, just a mob-scene day after day."

Leo nodded. "Hmmm. But that should make you more glad to see fellow humans."

"If you're referring to yourself, I'm very glad to see you."

"Sure, Jack," Leo said, "I know. Maybe I'm just tired. But you don't seem to say much. You're preoccupied."

"My work," Jack said. "This boy Manfred, this autistic child — I have that on my mind all the time."

But, as in the old days, his father could see through his pretexts effortlessly, with true parental instinct. "Come on, boy," Leo said. "You got a lot on your mind, but I know how you work. Your job is with your hands, and I'm talking about your mind, it's your *mind* that's turned inward. Can you get that psychotherapy business here on Mars? Don't tell me no, because I know better."

"I'm not going to tell you no," Jack said, "but I will tell you that it's none of your goddam business."

Beside him in the darkness his father seemed to shrink and settle. "Okay, boy," he murmured. "Sorry I butted in."

They were both uncomfortably silent.

"Hell," Jack said, "let's not quarrel, Dad. Let's go back inside and have a drink or something and then turn in. Silvia fixed up a good soft bed for you in the other bedroom. I know you'll have a good sleep."

"Silvia's very attentive to a person's needs," Leo said, with a faint note of accusation toward his son. Then his voice softened as he said, "Jack, I always worry about you. Maybe I'm old fashioned and don't understand about this mental illness business. Everybody seems to have

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it nowadays, it's common, like flu and polio used to be, like when we were kids and almost everybody caught measles. Now you have this. One out of every three, I heard on TV one time. Skizo — whatever. I mean, Jack, with so much to live for, why would anyone turn his back on life, like these skizo people do? It doesn't make sense. You got a whole planet to conquer here. Tomorrow, for instance, I'm going with you to the F.D.R. Mountains. You can show me around all over. And then I've got all the details on legal procedure here; I'm going to be buying. Listen, you buy in too, you hear me? I'll advance you the money." He grinned hopefully at Jack, showing his stainless-steel teeth.

"It's not my cup of tea," Jack said. "But thanks."

"I'll pick out the parcel for you," Leo offered.

"No. I'm just not interested."

"You enjoying your job, now, Jack? Making this machine to talk to the little boy who can't speak? Sounds like a worthy occupation. I'm proud to hear about it. David is a swell kid, and boy, is he proud of his dad."

"I know he is," Jack said.

"David doesn't show any signs of that skizo thing, does he?"

"No," Jack said.

Leo said, "I don't know where you got yours. Certainly not from me; I love people."

"I do, too," Jack said. He wondered how his father would act if he knew about Doreen. Probably Leo would be grief-stricken. He came from a straitlaced generation—born in in 1924, a long, long time ago. It was a different world then. Amazing, how his father had adapted to this world, now. A miracle. Leo, born in the boom period following World War One, and now standing here on the edge of the Martian desert . . . but he still would not understand about Doreen, how vital it was for him to maintain an intimate contact of this sort at any cost. Or rather, *almost* any cost.

"What's her name?" Leo said.

"W-what?" Jack stammered.

"I got a little of that telepathic sense," Leo said in a toneless voice. "Don't I?"

After a pause, Jack said, "Evidently."

"Does Silvia know?"

"No."

"I could tell because you didn't look me in the eye."

"Leave me alone," Jack said fiercely.

"Is she married? She got kids, too, this other woman you're mixed up with?"

Jack said in as level a voice as possible, "Why don't you use your telepathic sense and find out?"

"I just don't want to see Silvia hurt," Leo said.

"She won't be," Jack said.

"Too bad," Leo said, "to come all this way and find something out like this. Well—" He sighed. "I got my business anyhow. Tomorrow you and I'll get up good and early and get started."

Jack said, "Don't be too harsh a judge, Dad."

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"All right," Leo agreed. "I know it's modern times now. You think by this playing-around you keep yourself well. Right? Maybe so. Maybe it's a way to sanity. I don't mean you're not sane—"

"Just tainted," Jack said, with violent bitterness. Your own father! What an ordeal. What a miserable tragedy!

"I know you'll come out okay," Leo said. "I can see now that you're struggling. It's not just playing-around. I can tell by your voice you got troubles. Same ones you always had, only as you get older you wear out, and it's harder. Right? Yeah, I see that. This planet is lonely. It's a wonder all you emigrants didn't go crazy right off the bat. I can see why you would value love anywhere you can find it. What you need is something like what I've got, this land thing of mine. Maybe you can find it in building your machine for that poor mute kid. I'd like to see him."

"You will," Jack said. "Possibly tomorrow."

They stood for a moment longer, and then they walked back into the house. "Does Silvia still take dope?" Leo asked.

"Dope!" He laughed. "Phenobarbital. Yes, she does."

"Such a nice girl," Leo said. "Too bad she's so tense and worries so much. And helping that unfortunate widow next door, like you were telling me." In the living room, Leo seated himself in Jack's easy chair, crossed his legs and leaned back, sighing, making himself comfortable so that he could continue talking . . . he definitely had much more to say, on a variety of subjects, and he intended to say it.

In bed, Silvia lay almost lost in sleep, her faculties doused by the 100 milligram tablet of phenobarbital which, as usual, she had taken upon retiring. Vaguely, she had heard the murmur of her husband's and her father-in-law's voices from the yard. Once their tone became sharp and she sat up, alarmed.

Are they going to bicker? she asked herself. I hope Leo's stay isn't going to disrupt things. However, their voices had sunk back down, and now she rested easily once more.

He certainly is a fine old man, she thought. Much like Jack, only more set in his ways.

Lately, since he had started working for Arnie Kott, her husband had changed. No doubt it was the eerie job which he had been given. The mute, autistic Steiner boy upset her, and she had been sorry from the first to see him appear. Life was complicated enough already. The boy flitted in and out of the house, always running on his toes, his eyes always darting as if he saw objects not present, heard sounds beyond the normal range. If only time could be turned back and Norbert Steiner could be somehow restored to life! If only—

In her drugged mind she saw, in a flash, that ineffectual little man setting out in the morning with his suitcases of wares, salesman off on his rounds, yogurt and blackstrap molasses.

Is he still alive somewhere? Per-

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haps Manfred saw him, lost as the boy was — according to Jack — in disfigured time. What a surprise is in store for them when they make contact with the boy and find they have rekindled that sad little specter ... but more likely their theory is right and it is the next, he sees the next. They will have what they want. Why is it, Jack? What do you want it for, Jack? Affinity between you and that ill child. That it? Oh ... her thoughts gave way to darkness.

And then what? Will you care about me again?

She slept...

High in the sky circled meat-eating birds. At the base of the windowed building lay their excrement, he picked up the wads until he held several. They twisted and swelled like dough, and he knew there were living creatures within; he carried them carefully into the empty corridor of the building. One wad opened, parted with a split in its woven. hairlike side; it became too large to hold, and he saw it now in the wall. A compartment where it lay on its side, the rent so wide that he perceived the creature within.

Gubbish! A worm, coiled up, of wet, bony-white pleats, the inside gubbish worm, from a person's body. If only the high-flying birds could find it and eat it down, like that. He ran down the steps, which gave beneath his feet. Boards missing; he saw down through the sieve of wood, to the soil beneath, the cavity. dark, cold, full of wood so rotten that it lay in damp powder, destroyed by gubbish-rot.

Arms lifted up, tossed him to the circling birds; he floated up, falling at the same time. They ate his head off. And then he stood on a bridge over the sea. Sharks showed in the water, their sharp, cutting fins. He caught one on his line and it came sliding up from the water, mouth open, to swallow him; he stepped back but the bridge caved in and sagged so that the water reached his middle.

It rained gubbish, now; all was gubbish, wherever he looked. A group of those who didn't like him appeared at the end of the bridge and held up a loop of shark-teeth. He was emperor. They crowned him with the loop, and he tried to thank them. But they forced the loop down past his head to his neck, and they began to strangle him. They knotted the loop and the shark teeth cut his head off. Once more he sat in the dark, damp basement with the powdery rot around him, listening to the tidal water lap-lapping everywhere. A world where gubbish ruled, and he had no voice; the shark teeth had cut his voice out.

I am Manfred, he said.

"I tell you," Arnie Kott said to the girl beside him in the wide bed, "you're really going to be delighted when we make contact with him, I mean, we got an inside track, there; we got the future, and where else do you think things happen except in the future?"

Stirring, Doreen Anderton murmured.

"Don't go to sleep," Arnie said, leaning over to light another ciga-

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rette. "Listen, guess what; a big-time land speculator came over from Earth, today; we had a union guy at the rocket terminal, and he recognized him, although naturally the speculator registered under an assumed name; we checked with the carrier, and he got right out of there, eluding our guy. I predicted they'd be showing up! Listen, when we hear from that Steiner kid, it'll blow the lid off this whole thing. Right?" He shook the girl.

But she was asleep.

Gosh, I really got a gal, Arnie said to himself. She's really something. And she's done a terrific job in keeping that Bohlen from shucking it all and wandering off, the way those hebephrenic schizophrenics do. I mean, it's almost impossible to keep them at the grindstone, they're so moody and irresponsible. That guy Bohlen. He's an idiot savant, an idiot who can fix things, and we have to cater to his idiocy, we have to yield. You can't force a guy like that. He don't force. Arnie took hold of the covers and tossed them aside, off Doreen; he smiled at her bare legs, smiled to see her, sleeping, draw her short nightgown down to her knees.

He thought, I'm dying to get results on that project of Bohlen's. I can't wait. I know we're going to hear something really downright wonderful when we do start hearing. The closed-up mind of that kid; think of all the treasures it contains. Must be like fairyland, in there, all beautiful and pure and real innocent.

In her sleep Doreen turned and moaned.

XV

Into Leo Bohlen's hand his son Jack put a large green seed. Leo examined it, handed it back.

"What did you see?" Jack asked.

"I saw the seed."

"Did anything happen?"

Leo pondered, but he could not think of anything he had seen happen, so at last he said, "No."

Seated at the movie projector, Jack said, "Now watch." He snapped off the lights in the room, and then, on the screen, an image appeared as the projector whirred. It was a seed embedded in soil. As Leo watched the seed split open. Two probing feelers appeared. One started upward, the other divided into fine hairs and groped down. Meanwhile, the seed revolved in the soil. Enormous projections unfolded from the upward-moving feeler, and Leo gasped.

"Say, Jack!" he said. "Some seeds you got here on Mars. Look at it go! My gosh, it's working away like mad."

Jack said, "That's a plain ordinary lima bean, the same as I gave you just now. This film is speeded up, five days compressed into seconds. We can now see the motion that goes on in a germinating seed. Normally the process takes place too slowly for us to see any motion at all."

"Say, Jack," Leo said, "That's really something. So this kid's time-rate is like this seed. I understand. Things that we can see move would whizz around him so darn fast they'd be practically invisible. And I bet he sees slow processes like this seed

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here; I bet he can go out in the yard and sit down and watch the plants growing, and five days for him is like say ten minutes for us."

Jack said, "That's the theory, anyhow." He went on to explain to Leo how the chamber worked. The explanation was filled with technical terms, however, which Leo did not understand, and he felt a little irritable as Jack droned on. The time was eleven a.m. and still Jack gave no sign of taking him on his trip over F.D.R. Mountains. He seemed completely immersed in this.

"Very interesting," Leo said at one point.

"We take a tape recording, done at fifteen inches per second, and run it off for Manfred at three and three-fourths inches per second. A single word, such as 'tree.' And at the same time we flash up a picture of a tree and the word beneath it. A still, which we keep in sight for fifteen or twenty minutes. Then what Manfred says is recorded at three and three-fourths inches per second, and for our own listening we speed it up and replay at fifteen."

Leo said, "Listen, Jack, we just gotta get going on that trip."

Jack said angrily, "This is my job. I thought you wanted to meet him. He'll be over here any time now. She sends him over—"

Breaking in, Leo said, "Look, son, I came millions of miles to have a look at that land. Now are we going to fly there or not?"

Jack said, "We'll wait until the boy comes. We'll take him with us."

"Okay," Leo said. He wanted to avoid friction. He was willing to compromise, at least as much as was humanly possible.

"My God, here you are for the first time in your life on the surface of another planet. I should think you'd want to walk around, take a look at the canal, the ditch." Jack gestured over toward the right. "You haven't even glanced at it. And people have been wanting to see the canals, they've argued about their existence, for centuries!"

Feeling chagrined, Leo nodded dutifully. "Show me, then." He followed Jack from the workshop, outdoors into the dull ruddy sunlight. "Cold," Leo observed, sniffing the air. "Say, it's sure easy to walk around. I noticed that last night. I felt like I weighed only fifty or sixty pounds. Must be because Mars is so small, right? Must be good for people with cardiac conditions, except the air's so thin. I thought last night it was the corned beef that made me—

"Leo," his son said, "be quiet and look around, will you?"

Leo looked around. He saw a flat desert with meager mountains in the far distance. He saw a deep ditch of sluggish brown water, and, beside the ditch, a moss-like green vegetation. That was all, except for Jack's house and the Steiner house a little further on. He saw the garden, but he had seen that last night.

"Well?" Jack said.

Being obliging, Leo said, "Very impressive, Jack. You've got a nice place here. A nice little modern place. A little more planting and landscaping and I'd say perfect."

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Grinning at him crookedly, Jack said, "This is the dream of a million years, to stand here and see this."

"I know that, son. And I'm exceptionally proud of what you've accomplished, you and that fine woman." Leo nodded solemnly. "Now can we get started? Maybe you could go over to that other house where that boy is and get him. Or did David go over? Maybe David's getting him; I don't see him around."

"David's at school. He was picked up while you were sleeping."

Leo said, "I don't mind going over and getting that boy, Manfred or whatever his name is, if it's okay with you."

"Go ahead," Jack said. "I'll come along."

They walked past a small ditch of water, crossed an open field of sand and sparse fern-like plants, and arrived at the other house. Leo heard from within the sound of small girls' voices. Without hesitation he ascended the steps to the porch and rang the bell.

The door opened and there stood a big blond-haired woman with tired pain-filled eyes. "Good morning," Leo said, "I'm Jack Bohlen's dad. I guess you're the lady of the house. Say, we'll take your boy with us on a trip and bring him back safe and sound."

The big blonde woman looked past him to Jack, who had come up on the porch; she said nothing, but turned and went off back into the interior of her house. When she returned she had a small boy with her. So this is the skizo little fellow, Leo thought. Nice-looking. You'd never know in a million years.

"We're going on a ride, young man," Leo said to him. "How does that sound?" Then, remembering what Jack had said about the boy's time-sense, he repeated what he had said very slowly, dragging each word out.

The boy darted past him and shot down the steps and off toward the canal; he moved in a blur of speed and disappeared from sight behind the Bohlen house.

"Mrs. Steiner," Jack said, "I want you to meet my father."

The big blonde woman put out her hand vaguely. She did not seem to be all there herself, Leo observed. However, he shook hands with her. "Glad to meet you," he said politely. "Sorry to hear about the loss of your husband. It's a terrible thing, something striking like that, without any warning. I knew a fella back in Detroit, good friend of mine, did the same thing one weekend. Went out of the shop and said good-by and that was the last anybody saw of him."

Mrs. Steiner said, "How do you do, Mr. Bohlen."

"We'll go round up Manfred," Jack said to her. "We should be home late this afternoon."

As Leo and his son walked back, the woman remained where she was on the porch, looking after them.

"Pretty odd herself," Leo murmured. Jack said nothing.

They located the boy, standing off by himself in David's overflow garden, and presently the three

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of them were in the Yee Company 'copter, flying above the desert in the direction of the line of mountains to the north. Leo unfolded a great map which he had brought with him and began to make marks on it.

"I guess we can talk freely," he said to Jack, nodding his head toward the boy. "He won't—" He hesitated. "You know."

"If he understands us," Jack said drily, "it'll be—"

"Okay, okay," Leo said. "I just wanted to be sure." He carefully refrained from marking the place on the map that he had heard would be the UN site. But he did mark their route, using the gyrocompass reading visible on the dashboard of the 'copter. "What rumors have you heard, son?" he asked. "About UN interest in the F.D.R. Range?"

Jack said, "Something about a park or a power station."

"Want to know exactly what it is?"

Leo reached into his inside coat pocket and brought out an envelope. From it he took a photograph, which he handed to Jack. "Does this remind you of anything?"

Glancing at it, Jack saw that it was a picture of a long, thin building. He stared at it a long time.

"The UN," Leo said, "is going to build these. Multiple unit dwellings. Whole tracts of them, mile after mile, with shopping centers. Complete supermarkets, hardware stores, drugstores, laundries, ice cream parlors. All built by slave equipment, those construction automatons that feed themselves their own instructions."

Presently Jack said, "It looks like the co-op apartment house I lived in years ago. When I had my breakdown."

"Exactly. The co-op movement will be in with the UN on this. These F.D.R. Mountains were once fertile, as everybody knows. There was plenty of water here. The UN hydraulic engineers believe they can bring enormous quantities of water up to the surface from the table below. The water table is closer to the surface in these mountains than anywhere else on Mars. This is the original water-source for the canal network, the UN engineers believe."

"The co-op," Jack said in a strange voice, "here on Mars."

"They'll be fine modern structures," Leo said. "It's quite an ambitious project. The UN will be transporting people here free, providing their passage right to their new homes, and the cost of buying each unit will be small. It will take quite a big slice of these mountains, as you might guess, and as I hear it, they expect it to be ten to fifteen years before the project is completed."

Jack said nothing.

"Mass emigration," Leo said. "This will ensure it."

"I guess so," Jack said.

"The appropriations for this are fantastic," Leo said. "The co-op alone is putting up almost a trillion dollars. It has huge reserves of cash, you know. It's one of the richest groups on Earth. It has greater assets than the insurance group or any

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of the big banking systems. There's not a chance in the world that with them in on it the thing could fail." He added, "The UN has been negotiating with them for six years on this matter."

Finally Jack said, "What a change it will mean for Mars. Just to have the F.D.R. Range fertile. That alone."

"And densely populated," Leo reminded him.

"It's hard to believe," Jack said.

"Yeah, I know, boy, but there's no doubt of it. Within another few weeks it'll be generally known. I knew it a month ago. I've been getting investors I know to put up risk capital. I represent them, Jack. Alone, I just don't have the money."

Jack said, "You mean your whole idea is to get here before the UN actually takes the land. You're going to buy it for very little and then resell it to the UN for much more."

"We're going to buy it in great pieces," Leo said, "and then at once subdivide. Cut it up into lots, say, one hundred feet by eighty. Title will be in the hands of a fairly large number of individuals. Wives, cousins, employees, friends of the members of my group."

"Of your syndicate," Jack said.

"Yes, that's what it is," Leo said, pleased. "A syndicate."

After a time Jack said in a hoarse voice, "And you don't feel there's anything wrong with doing this?"

"Wrong in what sense? I don't get you, son."

"God," Jack said. "It's obvious."

"Not to me. Explain."

"You're gypping the entire population of Earth. They're the ones who'll have to put up all the money. You're increasing the costs of this project in order to make a killing."

"But Jack, that's what's meant by land speculation." Leo was puzzled. "What did you think land speculation was? It's been going on for centuries. You buy land cheap when nobody wants it because you believe for one reason or another that one day it will be worth a lot more. And it's inside tips that you go on. That's about all there is to go on, when you get down to it. Every land speculator in the world will be trying to buy in, when they get word. In fact they're doing that right now. I beat them here by a matter of days. It's this regulation that you have to actually be on Mars that gets them. They're not prepared at the drop of a hat to come here. So — they've missed out. Because by nightfall I expect to have put our deposit down on the land we want." He pointed ahead of them. "It's in there. I've got all sorts of maps; I won't have any trouble locating it. The location of the piece is in a vast canyon area called the Henry Wallace. To comply with the law, I have to actually set foot on the piece I intend to buy, and place some permanent marker, fully identifiable, in an exposed spot. I have such a marker with me, a regulation steel stake which bears my name. We'll land in the Henry Wallace and you can help me drive the stake in. It's just a formality; it won't take more than a few minutes." He smiled at his son.

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XVI

Looking at his father, Jack thought, *He's insane.*

But Leo smiled calmly at him, and Jack knew that his father was not insane, that it was exactly as he said. Land speculators did this. It was their way of going about their business, and there really was such a mammoth UN, co-op project about to start. As shrewd and experienced a businessman as his father could not be wrong. Leo Bohlen, and the men with him, did not act on the basis of a rumor. They had top connections. There had been a leak, either at the co-op or the UN or both, and Leo was putting all his resources to work to take advantage of it.

"It's — the biggest news so far," Jack said, "regarding the development of Mars." He could still hardly believe it.

"Long overdue," Leo said. "Should have taken place right from the start. But they expected private capital to be put up. They waited for the other fella to do it."

"This will change the lives of everybody who lives on Mars," Jack said. It would alter the balance of power, create a totally new ruling class. Arnie Kott, Bosley Touvim — the union settlements and the national settlements, all would be small fry, once the co-op, in conjunction with the UN, had moved in.

Poor Arnie, he thought. He won't survive this. Time, progress and civilization, all will have passed him by, Arnie and his steam baths that waste water, his tiny symbol of pomp.

"Now listen, Jack," his father said, "don't spread this information around, because it's confidential. What we want to watch is crooked business at the abstract company. That's the outfit that records your title. I mean, we put up our deposit and then other speculators, especially local ones here, get tipped off and then have pull at the abstract company, so it turns out—"

"I see," Jack said. The abstract company would predate the deposit of a local speculator, giving him seeming priority over Leo. There must be many tricks that can be played in a game like this, Jack said to himself. No wonder Leo works carefully.

"We've investigated the abstract company here. It appears to be honest. But you never know, when there's so much involved."

Suddenly Manfred Steiner gave a hoarse grunt.

Both Jack and Leo glanced up, startled. They had both forgotten about him; he was at the rear of the cab of the 'copter, his face pressed to the glass, staring down. He pointed excitedly.

Far below, Jack saw a party of Bleekmen threading its way along a mountain trail. "That's right," Jack said to the boy, "people down there, probably hunting." It occurred to him that very possibly Manfred had never seen a Bleekman. I wonder what his reaction would be, Jack mused, if he found himself facing them, all at once. How easy it would be to arrange it. All he had to do, really, was land the 'copter ahead of this particular party.

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"What are those?" Leo asked, looking down. "Martians?"

"That's what they are," Jack said.

"I'll be darned." Leo laughed. "So those are Martians ... they look more like aboriginal Negroes, like the African Bushmen."

"They're closely related to them," Jack said.

Manfred had become quite excited. His eyes shone and he ran back and forth from window to window, peering down and muttering.

What would happen if Manfred lived with a family of Bleekmen for a time? Jack wondered. They move slower than we do. Their lives are less complex and hectic. Possibly the sense of time is close to his ... to the Bleekman, we Earthmen may very well be hypomanic types, whizzing about at enormous velocity, expending huge amounts of energy over nothing at all. But it would not bring Manfred into his own society, to put him with the Bleekmen.

In fact, he realized, it might draw him so far away from us that there would be no chance of our ever communicating with him.

He decided not to land the 'copter.

"Do those fellas do any work?" Leo asked. "Those Martians?"

"A few have been tamed," Jack said, "as the phrase goes. But most continue to exist as they always have as hunters and fruit-gatherers. They haven't reached the farming stage yet."

When they reached the Henry Wallace, Jack set the 'copter down, and he and his father and Manfred stepped out onto the parched, rocky soil. Manfred was given paper and crayons to amuse himself, and then the two men set out to search for a suitable spot at which to drive the stake.

The spot, a low plateau, was found and the stake was driven, mostly by Jack. His father wandered about, inspecting rock formations and plants, with a clearly irritated and impatient frown. He did not seem to enjoy it here in this uninhabited region. However, he said nothing. He politely took note of a fossil formation which Jack pointed out to him.

They took photographs of the stake and the surrounding area, and then, their business done, they returned to the 'copter. There sat Manfred, on the ground, busily drawing with the crayons. The desolation of the area did not seem to bother him. The boy, wrapped up in his inner world, drew and ignored them; he glanced up now and then, but not at the two men. His eyes were blank.

What's he drawing? Jack wondered, and walked around behind the boy to see.

Manfred, glancing up now and then to peer sightlessly at the landscape around him, had drawn great, flat apartment buildings.

"Look at this, Dad," Jack said, and he managed to keep his voice calm and steady.

Together, the two of them stood behind the boy, watching him draw, watching the buildings become more and more distinct on the paper.

Well, there's no mistaking it, Jack

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thought. The boy is drawing the buildings which will be here. He is drawing the landscape which will come, not the landscape visible to our eyes.

"I wonder if he saw the photo I showed you," Leo said. "That one of the models."

"Maybe so," Jack said. It would provide an explanation; the boy had understood their conversation, seen the papers, gotten his inspiration from that. But the photo had shown the buildings from above. It was a different perspective from this. The boy had sketched the buildings as they would appear to an observer on the ground. As they would appear, Jack realized, to someone seated where we are right now.

"I wouldn't be surprised if you've got something in this time theory," Leo said. He glanced at his wristwatch. "Now, speaking of time, I'd say—"

"Yes," Jack agreed reflexively, "we'll get started back."

There was something more which he had noticed. He wondered if his dad had seen it. The buildings, the enormous co-op apartments, which the boy was sketching, were developing in an ominous direction before their eyes. As they watched, they saw final details which made Leo glare and snort.

The buildings were old, sagging with age. Their foundations had great cracks radiating upward. Windows were broken. And what looked like stiff tall weeds grew in the land around. It was a scene of ruin and despair, and a ponderous, timeless, inertial heaviness.

"Jack, he's drawing a slum!" Leo exclaimed.

That was it, a decaying slum. Buildings that had stood for years, perhaps even decades, which had passed their prime and dwindled into their twilight and senility.

Pointing at a yawning crack which he had just drawn, Manfred said, "Gubbish." His hand traced the weeds, the broken windows. Again he said, "Gubbish." He glanced at them, smiling in a frightened away.

"What does that mean, Manfred?" Jack asked.

There was no answer. The boy continued to sketch. And as he sketched the buildings, before their eyes, grew older and older. More in ruins with each passing moment.

"Let's go," Leo said hoarsely.

Jack took the boy's paper and crayons and got him onto his feet. The three of them reentered the 'copter.

"Look, Jack," Leo said. He was intently examining the boy's drawing. "What he's written over the entrance of the building."

In twisted, weavering letters Manfred had written:

AM-WEB

"Must be the name of the building," Leo said.

"It is," Jack said, recognizing the word. It was a contraction of a co-op slogan, *Alle Menschen werden Bruder*. "'All men become brothers,'" he said under his breath. "It's on co-op stationery." He remembered it well.

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Now, taking his crayons once more, Manfred resumed his work. As the two men watched, the boy drew at the top of the picture. Dark birds, Jack saw. Enormous, dusky, vulture-like birds.

At a broken window of the building, Manfred drew a round face with eyes, nose, turned-down despairing mouth. Someone within the building, gazing out silently and hopelessly, as if trapped within.

"Well," Leo said. "Interesting." His expression was one of grim outrage. "Now, why would he want to draw that? I don't think that's a very wholesome or positive attitude. Why can't he draw it like it's going to be, new and immaculate, with children playing, and pets, and contented people?"

Jack said, "Maybe he draws what he sees."

"Well, if he sees that, he's ill," Leo said. "There are so many bright, wonderful things he could see instead. Why would he want to see that?"

"Perhaps he has no choice," Jack said. *Gubbish,* he thought. I wonder. *Could gubbish mean time?* The force that to the boy means decay, deterioration, destruction and, at last, death? The force at work everywhere, on everything in the universe.

And is that all he sees?

If so, Jack thought, no wonder he's autistic. No wonder he can't communicate with us. A view of the universe that partial — it isn't even a complete view of time. Because time also brings new things into existence. It's also the process of maturation and growth. And evidently Manfred does not perceive time in that aspect.

Is he sick because he sees this? Or does he see this because he is sick? A meaningless question, perhaps, or anyhow one that can't be answered. This is Manfred's view of reality, and according to us, he is desperately ill. He does not perceive the rest of reality, which we do. And it is a dreadful section which he does see: reality in its most repellent aspect.

Jack thought, *And people talk about mental illness as an escape.* He shuddered. It was no escape. It was a narrowing, a contracting of life into, at last, a moldering, dark tomb, a place where nothing came or went; a place of total death.

The poor damned kid, he thought. How can he live from one day to the next, having to face the reality he does?

Somberly, Jack returned to the job piloting the 'copter. Leo looked out the window, contemplating the desert below. Manfred, with the taut, frightened expression on his face, continued to draw.

They gubbled and gubbled. He put his hands to his ears, but the product crept up through his nose. Then he saw the place. It was where he wore out. They threw him away there and gubbish lay in heaps up to his waist; gubbish filled the air.

"What is your name?"

"Steiner, Manfred."

"Age."

"Eighty-three."

"Vaccinated against smallpox?"

"Yes."

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"Any venereal diseases?"

"Well, a little."

"V.D. clinic for this man."

"Sir, my teeth. They're in the bag, along with my eyes."

"Your eyes, oh yes. Give this man his teeth and eyes before you take him to the V.D. clinic. How about your ears, Steiner?"

"Got 'em on, sir. Thank you, sir."

They tied his hands with gauze to the sides of the bed because he tried to pull out the catheter. He lay facing the window, seeing through the dusty, cracked glass.

Outside, a bug on tall legs picked through the heaps. It ate, and then something squashed it and went on leaving it squashed with its dead teeth sunk into what it wanted to eat. Finally its dead teeth got up and crawled out of its mouth in different directions.

He lay there for a hundred and twenty-three years and then his artificial liver gave out and he fainted and died. By that time they had removed both his arms and legs up to the pelvis because those parts of him had decayed.

He didn't use them anyhow. And without arms he didn't try to pull the catheter out, and that pleased them.

I been at AM-WEB for long time, he said. Maybe you can get me a transistor radio so I can tune in Friendly Fred's Breakfast Club, I like to hear the tunes, they play a lot of the old-time favorites.

Something outside gives me hayfever. Must be those yellow flowering weeds, why do they let them get so tall?

I once saw a ballgame.

For two days he lay on the floor, in a big puddle, and then the landlady found him and called for the truck to bring him here. He snored all the way, it woke him up. When they tried to give him grapefruit juice he could only work one arm, the other never worked again ever. He wished he could still make those leather belts, they were fun and took lots of time. Sometimes he sold them to people who came by on the weekend.

"Do you know who I am, Manfred?"

"No."

"I'm Arnie Kott. Why don't you laugh or smile sometimes, Manfred? Don't you like to run around and play?"

As he spoke Mr. Kott gubbled from both his eyes.

"Obviously he doesn't, Arnie, but that's not what concerns us here anyhow."

"What do you see, Manfred? Let us in on what you see. All those people, are they going to live there, is that it? Is that right, Manfred? Can you see people there?"

He put his hands over his face, and the eye-gubble stopped.

"I don't see why this kid never laughs."

Gubble, gubble.

XVII

Inside Mr. Kott's skin were dead bones, shiny and wet. Mr. Kott was a sack of bones, dirty and yet shiny-wet. His head was a skull that took in greens and bit them.

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Inside him, the greens became rotten things as something ate them to make them dead.

He could see everything that went on inside Mr. Kott, the teeming gubbish life. Meanwhile, the outside said, "I love Mozart. I'll put this tape on." The box read: Symphony 40 in G mol., K. 550. Mr. Kott fiddled with the knobs of the amplifier. "Bruno Walter conducting," Mr. Kott told his guests. "A great rarity from the golden age of recordings."

A hideous racket of screeches and shrieks issued from the speakers, like the convulsions of corpses. Mr. Kott shut off the tape transport.

"Sorry," he muttered. It was an old coded message, from Rockingham or Scott Temple or Anne. From someone, anyhow. Mr. Kott knew that. He knew by accident it had found its way into his library of music.

Sipping her drink, Doreen Anderton said, "What a shock. You should spare us, Arnie. Your sense of humor—"

"An accident," Arnie Kott said angrily. He rummaged for another tape. Aw, the hell with it, he thought "Listen, Jack," he said, turning. "I'm sorry to make you come here when I know your dad's visiting, but I'm running out of time. Show me your progress with the Steiner boy, okay?" His anticipation and concern made him stutter.

But Jack Bohlen hadn't heard him; he was saying something to Doreen there on the couch where the two of them sat together.

"We're out of booze," Jack said, setting down his empty glass.

"God sake," Arnie said. "I got to hear how you've done, Jack. Can't you give me anything? Are you two just going to sit there necking and whispering? I don't feel good." He went unsteadily into the kitchen, where Heliogabalus sat on a tall stool, like a dunce, reading a magazine. "Fix me a glass of warm water and baking soda," Arnie said.

"Yes, Mister." Heliogabalus closed his magazine and stepped from the stool. "I overheard. Why don't you send them out? They are no good, no good at all, Mister." From the cabinet over the sink he took the package of bicarbonate of soda and spooned out a teaspoonful.

"Who cares about your opinion?" Arnie said.

Doreen entered the kitchen, her face drawn and tired. "Arnie, I think I'll go home. I really can't take much of Manfred; he never stops moving around, never sits still. I can't stand that." Going up to Arnie she kissed him on the ear. "Good night, dear."

"I read about a kid who thought he was a machine," Arnie said. "He had to be plugged in, he said, to work. I mean, you have to be able to stand these fruits. Don't go. Stay for my sake. Manfred's a lot quieter when a woman's around, I don't know why. I have the feeling that Bohlen's accomplished nothing. I'm going out there and tell him to his face." A glass of warm water and baking soda was put into his right hand by his tame Bleekman. "Thanks." He drank it gratefully.

"Jack Bohlen," Doreen said, has done a fine job under difficult con-

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ditions. I don't want to hear anything said against him." She swayed slightly, smiling. "I'm a little drunk."

"Who isn't?" Arnie said. He put his arm around her waist and hugged her. "I'm so drunk I'm sick. Okay, that kid gets me, too. Look, I put on that old coded tape; I must be nuts." Setting down his glass he fumbled with the top buttons of her blouse. "Look away, Helio. Read your book." The Bleekman looked away. Holding Doreen against him, Arnie said, "I know they're ahead of me, those Earth bastards coming in everywhere you look. My man at the terminal can't even count them any more. They been coming in all day long." He kissed her on the collarbone, nuzzled lower and lower until she raised his head with the strength of her hands.

In the living room, his hotshot repairman hired away from Mr. Yee fiddled with the tape recorder, clumsily putting a fresh reel on. He had knocked over his empty glass by now.

What happens if they get there before me? Arnie Kott asked himself as he clung to Doreen, wheeling slowly about the kitchen with her as Heliogabalus read to himself. What if I can't buy in *at all?* Might as well be dead. There has to be a place for me; I love this planet.

Music blared. Jack Bohlen had gotten the tape going.

Doreen pinched him savagely and he let go of her; he walked from the kitchen, back into the living room, turned down the volume, and said, "Jack, let's get down to business."

"Right," Jack Bohlen agreed.

Coming from the kitchen after him, buttoning her blouse, Doreen made a wide circuit to avoid Manfred, who was down on his hands and knees; the boy had spread out a length of butcher paper and was pasting bits cut from magazines onto it with library paste. Patches of white showed on the rug where he had slopped.

Going up to the boy, Arnie bent down close to him and said, "Do you know who I am, Manfred?"

There was no answer from the boy, nothing to show he had even heard.

"I'm Arnie Kott," Arnie said. "Why don't you laugh or smile sometimes, Manfred? Don't you like to run around and play?" He felt sorry for the boy, sorry and distressed.

Jack Bohlen said in an unsteady, thick voice, "Obviously he doesn't, Arnie, but that's not what concerns us here anyhow." His gaze was befuddled; the hand that held the glass shook.

But Arnie continued. "What do you see, Manfred? Let us in on what you see." He waited, but there was only silence. The boy concentrated on his pasting. He had created a montage on the paper: a jagged strip of green, then a perpendicular rise, gray and dense, forbidding.

"What's it mean?" Arnie said.

"It's a place," Jack said. "A building. I brought it along." He went off, returning with a manila envelope; from it he brought a large crumpled child's crayon drawing, which he held up for Arnie to examine. "There," Jack said. "That's it. You

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wanted me to establish communication with him. Well, I established it." He had some trouble with the long words; his tongue seemed to catch.

Arnie, however, did not care how drunk his repairman was. He was accustomed to having his guest stunk up. Hard liquor was rare on Mars, and when people came onto it, as they did at Arnie's place, they generally reacted as Jack Bohlen had. What mattered was the task which Jack had been given. Arnie picked up the picture and studied it.

"This is it?" he asked Jack. "What else?"

"Nothing else."

"What about that chamber that slows things down?"

"Nothing," Jack said.

"Can the boy read the future?"

"Absolutely," Jack said. "There's no doubt of it. That picture is proof right there, unless he heard us talking." Turning to Doreen he said, in a slow, thick voice, "Did he hear us, do you think? No, you weren't there. It was my dad. I don't think he heard. Listen, Arnie. You aren't supposed to see this, but I guess it's okay. It's too late now. This is a picture nobody is supposed to see. This is the way it's going to be a century from now, when it's in ruins."

"What the hell is it?" Arnie said. "I can't read a kid's nutty drawing. Explain it to me."

"This is AM-WEB," Jack said. "A big, big housing tract. Thousands of people living there. Biggest on Mars. Only . . . it's crumbling into rubble, —and it isn't even built yet."

There was silence. Arnie was baffled.

"Maybe you're not interested," Jack said.

"Sure I am," Arnie said angrily. He appealed to Doreen, who stood off to one side, looking pensive. "Do you understand this?"

"No, dear," she said.

"Jack," Arnie said, "I called you here for your report. And all I get is this dim-witted drawing. Where is this big housing tract?"

"In the F.D.R. Mountains," Jack said.

Arnie felt his pulse slow, then with difficulty labor on. "Oh yeah, I see," he said. "I understand."

Grinning, Jack said, "I thought you would. You're interested in that. You know, Arnie, you think I'm a schizophrenic and Doreen thinks so, and my father thinks so . . . but I *do* care what your motives are. I can get you plenty of information about the UN project in the F.D.R. Mountains. What else do you want to know about it? It's not a power station and it's not a park. It's in conjunction with the co-op. It's a multiple-unit, infinitely large structure with supermarkets and bakeries, dead center in the Henry Wallace."

"You got all this from this kid?"

"No," Jack said. "From my dad."

They looked at each other a long time.

"Your dad is a speculator?" Arnie said.

"Yes," Jack said.

"He just arrived from Earth the other day?"

"Yes," Jack said.

"Jesus," Arnie said to Doreen.

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"Jesus, it's this guy's father. And he's already bought in."

"Yes," Jack said.

"Is there anything left?" Arnie said.

Jack shook his head.

"Oh, Jesus," Arnie said. "And he's on my payroll. I never had such bad luck."

Jack said, "I didn't know until just now that this was what you wanted to find out, Arnie."

"Yeah, that's true," Arnie said. Speaking to Doreen he said, "I never told him, so it's not his fault." He aimlessly picked up the boy's drawing. "And this is what it'll look like."

"Eventually," Jack said. "Not at first."

To Manfred, Arnie said, "You did have the information, but we got it from you too late."

"Too late," Jack echoed. He seemed to understand. He looked stricken. "Sorry, Arnie. I really am sorry. You should have told me."

"I don't blame you," Arnie said. "We're still friends, Bohlen. It's just a case of bad luck. You've been completely honest with me; I can see that. God damn, it sure is too bad. He's already filed his claim, your dad? Well, that's the way it goes."

"He represents a group of investors," Jack said hoarsely.

"Naturally," Arnie said. "With unlimited capital. What could I do anyhow? I can't compete. I'm just one guy." To Manfred he said, "All these people—" He pointed to the drawing. "Are they going to live there, is that it? Is that right, Manfred? Can you see lots of people living there?" His voice rose, out of control.

"Please, Arnie," Doreen said. "Calm down. I can see how upset you are, and you shouldn't be."

Raising his head, Arnie said to her in a low voice, "I don't see why this kid never laughs."

The boy suddenly said, "Gubble, gubble."

"Yeah," Arnie said, with bitterness. "That's right. That's real good communication, kid. 'Gubble, gubble.' Jack, you have a fine communication established; I can see that."

Jack said nothing. Now he looked grim and uneasy.

"I can see it's going to take a long time more," Arnie said, "to bring this kid out, so we can talk to him. Right? Too bad we can't continue. I'm not going any farther with it."

"No reason why you should," Jack said in a leaden voice.

"Right," Arnie said. "So that's the end of your job."

Doreen said, "But you can still use him for—"

"Oh, of course," Arnie said. "I need a skilled repairman anyhow, for stuff like that encoder. I got a thousand items busting down every day. I just mean this one particular job, here. Send him back to B-G, this kid. AM-WEB. Yeah, the co-op buildings get funny names like that. The co-op coming over to Mars! That's a big outfit, that co-op. They'll pay high for their land. They've got the loot. Tell your dad from me that he's a shrewd businessman."

"Can we shake hands, Arnie?" Jack asked.

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"Sure, Jack." Arnie stuck out his hand and the two of them shook drunkenly, hard and long, looking each other in the eye. "I expect to see a lot of you, Jack. This isn't the end between you and me; it's just the beginning." He let go of Jack Bohlen's hand, walked back into the kitchen, stood by himself, weaving and thinking.

Presently Doreen joined him. "That was dreadful news for you, wasn't it?" she said, putting her arm around him.

"Very bad," Arnie said. "Worst I had in a long time. But I'll be okay; I'm not scared of the co-op movement. Lewistown and the Water Workers were here first, and they'll be here a lot longer. If I had gotten this project with the Manfred Steiner boy started sooner, it would have worked out differently, and I sure don't blame Jack for that." But inside him, in his heart, he thought, *You were working against me, Jack. All the time. You were working with your dad. From the start, too. From the day I hired you.*

He returned to the living room. At the tape transport, Jack stood morose and silent, fooling with the knobs.

"Don't take it hard," Arnie said to him.

"Thanks, Arnie," Jack said. His eyes were dull. "I feel I've let you down."

"Not me," Arnie assured him. "You haven't let me down, Jack. Because nobody lets me down. Believe me, nobody."

On the floor, Manfred Steiner pasted away, ignoring them all.

As he flew his father back to the house, leaving the F.D.R. Range behind them, Jack thought, Should I show the boy's picture to Arnie? Should I take it to Lewistown and hand it over to him? It's so little . . . it just doesn't look like what I ought to have produced, by now.

He knew that tonight he would have to see Arnie, in any case.

"Very desolate down there," his dad said, nodding toward the desert below. "Amazing you people have done so much reclamation work; you should all be proud." But his attention was actually on his maps. He spoke in a perfunctory manner; it was a formality.

Jack snapped on his radio transmitter and called Arnie, at Lewistown. "Excuse me, dad. I have to talk to my boss."

The radio made a series of noises, which attracted Manfred momentarily. He ceased poring over his drawing and raised his head.

"I'll take you along," Jack said to the boy.

Presently he had Arnie. "Hi, Jack," Arnie's voice came boomingly. "I been trying to get hold of you. Can you—"

"I'll be over to see you tonight," Jack said.

"Not before? How about this afternoon?"

"Afraid tonight is as soon as I can make it," Jack said. "There—" He hesitated. "Nothing to show you until tonight." If I get near him, he knew, I'll tell him about the UN, co-op project. He'll get everything out of me. I'll wait until after my

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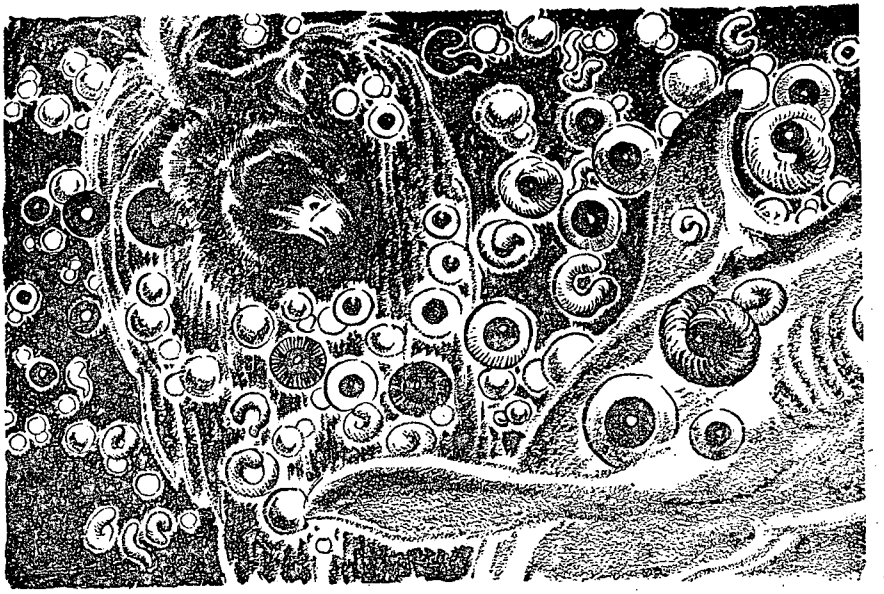

dad's claim has been filed, and then it won't matter.

"Tonight, then," Arnie agreed. "And I'll be on pins, Jack. Sitting on pins. I know you're going to come up with something. I got a lot of confidence in you."

Jack thanked him, said good-by and rang off.

"Your boss sounds like a gentleman," his dad said, after the connection had been broken. "And he certainly looks up to you. I expect you're of priceless value to his organization, a man with your ability."

Jack said nothing. Already he felt guilty.

"Draw me a picture," he said to Manfred, "of how it's going to go tonight, between me and Mr. Kott." He took away the paper on which the boy was drawing, handing him a blank piece. "Will you, Manfred? You can see ahead to tonight. You, me, Mr. Kott, at Mr. Kott's place."

The boy took a blue crayon and began to draw. As he piloted the 'copter, Jack watched.

With great care, Manfred drew. At first Jack could not make it out. Then he grasped what the scene showed. Two men. One was hitting the other in the eye.

Manfred laughed, a long, high-pitched, nervous laugh, and suddenly hugged the picture against himself.

Feeling cold, Jack turned his attention back to the controls before him. He felt himself perspire, the damp sweat of anxiety. Is that how it's going to be? he asked, silently, within himself. A fight between me and Arnie? And you will witness it,

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perhaps ... or at least know of it, one day.

"Jack," Leo was saying, "you'll take me to the abstract company, won't you? And let me off there? I want to get my papers filed. Can we go right there, instead of back to the house? I have to admit I'm uneasy, there must be local operators who're watching all this, and I can't be too careful."

Jack said, "I can only repeat. It's immoral, what you're doing."

"Just let me handle it," his father said. "It's my way of doing business, Jack. I don't intend to change."

"Profiteering," Jack said.

"I won't argue it with you," his father said. "It's none of your concern. If you don't feel like assisting me, after I've come millions of miles from Earth, I guess I can manage to round up public transportation." His tone was mild, but he had turned red.

"I'll take you there," Jack said.

"I can't stand to be moralized at," his father said.

Jack said nothing. He turned the 'copter south, toward the UN buildings at Pax Grove.

Drawing away with his blue crayon, Manfred made one of the two men in his picture, the one who had been hit in the eye, fall down and become dead. Jack saw that, saw the figure become supine and then still. Is that me? he wondered. Or is it Arnie? Someday—perhaps soon—I will know.

Inside Mr. Kott's skin were dead bones, shiny and wet. Mr. Kott was a sack of bones, dirty and yet

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shiny-wet. His head was a skull that took in greens and bit them. Inside him the greens became rotten things as something ate them to make them dead.

Jack Bohlen, too, was a dead sack, teeming with gubbish. The outside that fooled almost everyone, it was painted pretty and smelled good, bent down over Miss Anderton, and he saw that; he saw it wanting her in an awful fashion. It poured its wet, sticky self nearer to her and the dead bug words popped from its mouth.

"I love Mozart," Mr. Kott was saying. "I'll put this tape on." He fiddled with the knobs of the amplifier. "Bruno Walter conducting. A great rarity from the golden age of recordings."

A hideous racket of screeches and shrieks issued from the speakers, like the convulsions of corpses. He shut off the tape transport.

"Sorry," Arnie Kott muttered.

Wincing at the sound, Jack Bohlen sniffed the woman's body beside him saw shiny perspiration on her upper lip where a faint smear of her lipstick made her look cut. He wanted to bite her lips, he wanted to make blood, there. His thumbs wanted to dig into her armpits and make an upward circle to her breasts; he would feel they belonged to him to do with what he wanted.

"What a shock," she said. "You should spare us, Arnie. Your sense of humor—"

"An accident," Arnie said. He rummaged in the locker for another tape.

Reaching out his hand Jack Bohlen touched the woman's lap. She drew her legs up and turned toward him so that her knees pressed into him; she sat like an animal, crouching in expectation. I can't wait to get you and me out of here and where we can be alone, Jack thought He closed his fingers around her bare ankle and she yapped with pain, smiling at him.

"Listen, Jack," Arnie Kott said, turning toward him. "I'm sorry—" His words were cut off. Jack did not hear the rest. The woman beside him was telling him something. Hurry, she was saying. I can't wait either. Her breath came in short, brisk hisses, from her mouth, and she gazed at him fixedly, her face close to his, her eyes huge, as if she were impaled. Neither of them heard Arnie. The room, now, was silent.

Had he missed something Arnie had said? Jack reached out and took hold of his glass, but there was nothing in it. "We're out of booze," he said, setting it back down on the coffee table.

"God sake," Arnie said. "I got to hear how you've done, Jack. Can't you give me anything?" Talking still, he moved away, from the living room into the kitchen; his voice dimmed. Beside Jack the woman still stared up at him, her mouth weak, as if he were holding her tightly to him, as if she could hardly breathe. We have to get out of this place and by ourselves, Jack realized. Then, looking around, he saw that they were alone. Arnie had gone out of the room and could no longer see them. In the kitchen he was con-

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versing with his tame Bleekman. And so he was already alone with her.

"Not here," Doreen said. But her body fluttered, it did not resist him as he squeezed her about the waist; she did not mind being squashed because she wanted to, too. She could not hold back either. "Yes," she said. "But hurry." Her nails dug into his shoulders and she shut her eyes tight, moaning and shuddering.

Bending over her he saw her languid, almost rotting beauty fall away. Yellow cracks spread through her teeth, and the teeth split and sank into her gums, which in turn became green and dry like leather, and then she coughed and spat up into his face quantities of dust. The Gubbler had gotten her, he realized, before he had been able to. So he let her go. She settled backward, her breaking bones making little sharp splintering sounds.

Her eyes fused over, opaque, and from behind one eye the lashes became the furry, probing feet of a thick-haired insect stuck back there wanting to get out. Its tiny pin-head red eye peeped past the loose rim of her unseeing eye, and then withdrew; after that the insect squirmed making the dead eye of the woman bulge, and then, for an instant, the insect peered through the lens of her eye, looked this way and that. It saw him but was unable to make out who or what he was. It could not fully make use of the decayed mechanism behind which it lived.

Like overripe puffballs, her breasts wheezed as they deflated into flatness, and from their dry interiors, through the web of cracks spreading across them, a cloud of spores arose and drifted up into his face, the smell of mold and age and of the Gubbler, who had come and inhabited the inside long ago and was now working his way out to the surface.

The dead mouth twitched and then from deep inside at the bottom of the pipe which was the throat a voice muttered, "You weren't fast enough." And then the head fell off entirely, leaving the white pointed stick-like end of the neck projecting.

Jack released her and she folded up into a little dried-up heap of flat, almost transparent plates, like the discarded skin of a snake, almost without weight. He brushed them away from him with his hand. And at the same time, to his surprise, he heard her voice from the kitchen.

"Arnie, I think I'll go home. I really can't take much of Manfred. He never stops moving around, never sits still." Turning his head he saw her in there, with Arnie, standing very close to him. She kissed him on the ear. "Good night, dear," she said.

"I read about a kid who thought he was a machine," Arnie said, and then the kitchen door shut; Jack could neither hear nor see them.

Rubbing his forehead he thought, I really am drunk. *What's wrong with me?* My mind, splitting . . . he blinked, tried to gather his faculties. On the rug, not far from the couch, Manfred Steiner cut out a picture from a magazine with blunt scissors, smiling to himself. The paper rustled as he cut it, a sound that distracted

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Jack and made it even more difficult for him to put in focus his wandering attention.

From beyond the kitchen door he heard labored, prolonged grunts. What are they doing? he asked himself. The three of them, she and Arnie and the tame Bleekman, together . . . the grunts became slower and then ceased. There was no sound at all.

I wish I was home, Jack said to himself with desperate, utter confusion. I want to get out of here, but how? He felt weak and terribly sick and he remained on the couch, where he was, unable to break away, to move or think.

A voice in his mind said, Gubble gubble gubble, I am gubble gubble gubble gubble gubble.

Stop, he said to it.

Gubble, gubble, it answered.

Dust fell on him from the walls. The room creaked with age and dust, rotting around him. Gubble, gubble, gubble, the room said. The Gubbler is here to gubble gubble you and make you into gubbish.

Getting unsteadily to his feet he managed to walk, step by step, over to Arnie's amplifier and tape recorder. He picked up a reel of tape and got the box open. After several faulty, feeble efforts he succeeded in putting it on the spindle of the transport.

The door to the kitchen opened a crack, and an eye watched him. He could not tell whose it was.

I have to get out of here, Jack Bohlen said to himself. Or fight it off. I have to break this, throw it away from me or be eaten.

It is eating me up.

He twisted the volume control convulsively so that the music blared up and deafened him, roared through the room, spilling over the walls, the furniture, lashing at the ajar kitchen door, attacking everyone and everything in sight.

The kitchen door fell forward, its hinges breaking; it crashed over and a thing came hurriedly sideways from the kitchen, dislodged into belated activity by the roar of the music. The thing scrabbled up to him and past him, feeling for the volume control knob. The music ebbed.

But he felt better. He felt sane once more, thank God.

Jack Bohlen dropped his father Leo Bohlen off at the abstract office and then, with Manfred, flew on to Lewistown, to Doreen Anderton's apartment.

When she opened the door and saw him she said, "What is it, Jack?" She quickly held the door open and he and Manfred went on inside.

"It's going to be very bad tonight," he told her.

"Are you sure?" She seated herself across from him. "Do you have to go at all? Yes, I suppose so. But maybe you're wrong."

Jack said, "Manfred has already told me. He's already seen it."

"Don't be scared," Doreen said softly.

"But I am," he said.

"*Why* will it be bad?"

"I don't know. Manfred couldn't tell me that."

"But—" She gestured. "You've

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made contact with him. That's wonderful. That's what Arnie wants."

"I hope you'll be there," Jack said.

"Yes, I'll be there. But — there's not much I can do. Is my opinion worth anything? Because I'm positive that Arnie will be pleased. I think you're having an anxiety attack for no reason."

"It's the end," Jack said, "between me and Arnie — tonight. I know it, and I don't know why." He felt sick to his stomach. "It almost seems to me that Manfred does more than know the future. In some way he *controls* it. He can make it come out the worst possible way because that's what seems natural to him, that's how he sees reality. It's as if by being around him we're sinking into his reality. It's starting to seep over us and replace our own way of viewing things, and the kind of events we're accustomed to see come about, now somehow don't come about. It's not natural for me to feel this way. I've never had this feeling about the future, before."

He was silent then.

"You've been around him too much," Doreen said. "Tendencies in you that are—" She hesitated. "Unstable tendencies, Jack. Allied to his. You were supposed to draw him into our world, the shared reality of our society ... instead hasn't he drawn you into his own? I don't think there's any precognition. I think it's been a mistake from the start. It would be better if you got out of it, if you left that boy—" She glanced toward Manfred, who had gone to the window of her apartment to stare out at the street below. "If you didn't have anything more to do with him."

"It's too late for that," Jack said.

"You're not a psychotherapist or doctor," Doreen said. "It's one thing for Milton Glaub to be in close contact day after day with autistic and schizophrenic persons. But you! You're a repairman who blundered into this because of a crazy impulse on Arnie's part. You just happened to be there in the same room with him fixing his encoder and so you wound up with this. You shouldn't be so passive, Jack. You're letting your life be shaped by chance. And for God's sake, *don't you recognize that passivity for what it is?*"

After a pause he said, "I suppose I do."

"Say it."

He said, "It's a tendency for a schizophrenic individual to be passive. I know that."

"Be decisive! Don't go any further with this. Call Arnie and tell him you're simply not competent to handle Manfred. He should be back at Camp B-G where Milton Glaub can work with him. They can build that slowed-down chamber there. They were starting to, weren't they?"

"They'll never get around to it. They're talking about importing the equipment from Home. You know what that means."

"And you'll never get around to it," Doreen said, "because you'll crack up mentally. I can see the future too. You know what I see? I see you having a much more serious collapse than ever before; I see — total psychological collapse

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for you, Jack, if you keep working on this. Already you're being mauled by acute schizophrenic anxiety. By *panic,* isn't that so? Isn't it?"

He nodded.

"I saw that in my brother," Doreen said. "Schizophrenic panic, and once you see it break out in a person, you can never forget it. The collapse of their reality around them . . . the collapse of their perceptions of time and space, cause and effect . . . and isn't that what's happening to you? You're talking as if this meeting with Arnie can't be altered by anything you do. And that's a deep regression on your part from adult responsibility and maturity. That's not like you at all." Breathing deeply her chest rising and falling painfully, she went on, "I'll call Arnie and tell him you're pulling out, and he'll have to get someone else to finish with Manfred. And I'll tell him that you've made no progress, that it's pointless for you and for him to continue with this. I've seen Arnie get these whims before. He keeps them percolating for a few days or weeks, and then he forgets them. He can forget this."

Jack said, "He won't forget this one."

"Try," she said.

"No," he said. "I have to go there tonight and give him my progress report. I said I would. I owe it to him."

"You're a damn fool," Doreen said.

"I know it," Jack said. "But not for the reason you think. I'm a fool because I took on a job without looking ahead to its consequences. I—" He broke off. "Maybe it is what you said. I'm not competent to work with Manfred. That's it, period."

"But you're still going ahead. What do you have to show Arnie tonight? Show it to me, right now."

Getting out a manila envelope, Jack reached into it and drew out the picture of the buildings which Manfred had drawn. For a long time Doreen studied it. And then she handed it back to him.

"That's an evil and sick drawing," she said in a voice almost inaudible. "I know what it is. It's the Tomb World, isn't it? That's what he's drawn. The world after death. And that's what he sees, and through him, that's what you're beginning to see. You want to take that to Arnie? You have lost your grip on reality! Do you think Arnie wants to see an abomination like that? Burn it."

"It's not that bad," he said, deeply perturbed by her reaction.

"Yes, it is," Doreen said. "And it's a dreadful sign that it doesn't strike you that way. Did it at first?"

He had to nod yes.

"Then you know I'm right," she said.

"I have to go on," he said. "I'll see you at his place tonight." Going over to the window, he tapped Manfred on the shoulder. "We have to go, now. We'll see this lady tonight, and Mr. Kott, too."

"Good-by, Jack," Doreen said, accompanying him to the door. Her large dark eyes were heavy with despair. "There's nothing I can say to stop you; I can see that. You've changed. You're so less viable now than you were just a day or so ago . . . do you know that?"

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"No," he said. "I didn't realize that." But he was not surprised to hear it. He could feel it, hanging heavy over his limbs, choking his heart. Leaning toward her, he kissed her on her full, good-tasting lips. "I'll see you tonight."

She stood at the doorway, silently watching him and the boy go.

In the time remaining before evening, Bohlen decided to drop by the Public School and pick up his son. There, in that place which he dreaded before any other, he would find out if Doreen were right; he would learn if his morale and ability to distinguish reality from the projections of his own unconscious had been impaired or not. For him, the Public School was the crucial location. And, as he directed his Yee Company 'copter toward it, he felt deep within himself that he would be capable of handling a second visit there.

And he was violently curious, too, to see Manfred's reaction to the place, and to its simulacra, the Teaching Machines. For some time now he had had an abiding hunch that Manfred, confronted by the School's Teachers, would show a significant response, perhaps similar to his own, perhaps totally opposite. In any case, a reaction.

But then he thought resignedly, Isn't it too late? Isn't the job over, hasn't Arnie canceled it because it doesn't matter?

Haven't I already been to his place tonight? What time is it?

He thought in fright, *I've lost all sense of time.*

"We're going to the Public School," he murmured to Manfred. "Do you like that idea? See the school where David goes."

The boy's eyes gleamed with anticipation. Yes, he seemed to be saying. I'd like that. Let's go.

"Okay," Jack said, only with great difficulty managing to operate the controls of the 'copter. He felt as if he were at the bottom of a great stagnant sea, struggling merely to breathe, almost unable to move. But why?

He did not know. He went on, as best he could.

Inside Mr. Kott's skin were dead bones, shiny and wet. Mr. Kott was a sack of bones, dirty and yet shiny-wet. His head was a skull that took in greens and bit them. Inside him the greens became rotten things as something ate them to make them dead. Jack Bohlen, too, was a dead sack, teeming with gubbish. The outside that fooled almost everyone, it was painted pretty and smelled good, bent down over Miss Anderton, and he saw that; he saw it wanting her in a filthy fashion. It poured its wet, sticky self nearer and nearer to her and the dead bug words popped from its mouth and fell on her. The dead bug words scampered off into the folds of her clothing, and some squeezed into her skin and entered her body.

"I love Mozart," Mr. Kott said. "I'll put this tape on."

Her clothing itched her, it was full of hair and dust and the droppings of the bug words. She scratched at it and the clothing tore in strips.

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Digging her teeth into the strips she chewed them away.

Fiddling with the knobs of the amplifier, Mr. Kott said, "Bruno Walter conducting. A great rarity from the golden age of recordings."

A hideous racket of screeches and shrieks issued from somewhere in the room, and after a time she realized that it was her. She was convulsed from within, all the corpse-things in her were heaving and crawling, struggling out into the light of the room. God, how could she stop them? They emerged from her pores and scuttled off, dropping from strands of gummy web to the floor, to disappear into the cracks between the boards.

"Sorry," Arnie Kott muttered.

"What a shock," she said. "You should spare us, Arnie." Getting up from the couch she pushed the dark, bad-smelling object away that clung to her. "Your sense of humor—" she said.

He turned and saw her as she stripped herself of the last of her clothing. He had put down the reel of tape, and now he came toward her, reaching out.

"Do it," she said, and then they were both on the floor, together; he used his feet to remove his own clothing, hooking his toes into the fabric and tearing until it was away. Arms locked around each other they rolled into the darkness beneath the stove and lay there, sweating and gulping in the dust and the heat and the damp of their own bodies. "Do it," she said, digging her knees into his sides to hurt him.

"An accident," he said, squashing her against the floor, breathing into her face.

Eyes appeared beyond the edge of the stove. Something peeped in at them as they lay together in the darkness. Something watched. It had put away its paste and scissors and magazines, dropped all that to watch this and gloat and savor each sound they made.

"Go away," she gasped at it. But it did not go away. "More," she said, then, and it laughed at her. It laughed and laughed, as she and the weight squashing her kept on. They could not stop.

Gubble me more, she said. Gubble gubble gubble me, you Gubbler. Gubble gubble, I like gubble! Don't stop. Gubble, gubble gubble gubble, *gubble!*

XVIII

As Jack Bohlen lowered the Yee Company 'copter toward the landing field of the Public School directly below, he glanced at Manfred and wondered what the boy was thinking. Wrapped up in his thoughts Manfred Steiner stared sightlessly out, his features twisted into a grimace that repelled Jack and made him instantly look away.

Why did he have anything to do with this boy? Jack wondered. Doreen was right. He was over his head, and the unstable, schizophrenic aspects of his own personality were being stirred into life by the presence beside him. And yet he did not know how to get out. Somehow it was too late, as if time had collapsed and left him here, for eter-

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nity, caught in a symbiosis with this unfortunate, mute creature who did nothing but rake over and inspect his own private world, again and again.

He had imbibed, on some level, Manfred's worldview. It was obviously bringing about the stealthy disintegration of his own.

Tonight, he thought. I have to keep going until tonight: somehow I must hold out until I can see Arnie Kott. Then I can jettison all this and return to my own space, my own world; I will never have to look at Manfred Steiner again.

Arnie, for God's sake, save me, he thought.

"We're here," he said as the 'copter bumped to a halt on the roof field. He switched off the motor.

At once Manfred moved to the door, eager to get out.

So you want to see this place, Jack thought. I wonder why. He got to his feet and went to unlock the door of the 'copter; at once Manfred hopped out onto the roof and scampered toward the descent ramp, almost as if he knew the way by heart.

As Jack stepped from the ship the boy disappeared from sight. On his own he had hurried down the ramp and plunged into the School.

Doreen Anderton and Arnie Kott, Jack said to himself. The two people who mean the most to me, the friends with whom my contacts, my intimacy with life itself, is the strongest. And yet it's right there that the boy has managed to infiltrate. He has unfastened me from my relationships where they are the strongest.

What's left? he asked himself. Once I have been isolated there, the rest — my son, my wife, my father, Mr. Yee — all follow almost automatically, without a fight.

I can see what lies ahead for me if I continue to lose, step by step, to this completely psychotic boy. Now I can see what psychosis is: the utter alienation of perception from the objects of the outside world. Especially the objects which matter: the warm-hearted people there. And what takes their place? A dreadful preoccupation with — the endless ebb and flow of one's own self. The changes emanating from within which affect only the inside world. It is a splitting apart of the two worlds, inner and outer, so that neither registers on the other. Both still exist, but separately.

It is the stopping of time. The end of experience, of anything new. Once the person becomes psychotic, nothing ever happens to him again.

And, he realized, I stand on the threshold of that. Perhaps I always did; it was implicit in me from the start. But this boy had led me a long way. Or rather, because of him I have gone a long way.

A coagulated self, fixed and immense, which effaces everything else and occupies the entire field. Then the most minute change is examined with greatest attention. That is Manfred's state now; has been, from the beginning. The ultimate stage of the schizophrenic process.

"Manfred, wait," he called, and followed slowly after the boy, down the ramp and into the Public School building.

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Seated in June Henessy's kitchen, sipping coffee, Silvia Bohlen discoursed on her problems of late.

"What's so awful about them," she said, meaning Erna Steiner and the Steiner children, "is that, let's face it they're vulgar. We're not supposed to talk in terms like that, but I've been forced to see so much of them that I can't ignore it. My face has been rubbed in it every day."

June Henessy, wearing white shorts and a skimpy halter, padded barefoot here and there in the house, watering from a glass pitcher her various indoor plants. "That's a really weird boy. He's the worst of all, isn't he?"

Shuddering, Silvia said, "And he's over all day long. Jack is working with him, you know, trying to make him part of the human race. I think myself they ought to just wipe out freaks and sports like that. It's terribly destructive in the long run to let them live, it's a false mercy to them and to us. That boy will have to be cared for the rest of his life. He'll never be out of an institution."

Returning to the kitchen with the empty pitcher, June said, "I want to tell you what Tony did the other day." Tony was her current lover. She kept the other ladies, especially Silvia, up to date. "We had lunch together, over at Geneva II, at a French restaurant he knows. We had escargot — you know, snails; they serve them to you in the shells and you get them out with a horrible looking fork that has tines a foot long. Of course, that's all black-market food. Did you know that? That there're restaurants serving exclusively black-market delicacies? I didn't until Tony took me there. I can't tell you the name of it, of course."

"Snails," Silvia said with aversion, thinking of all the wonderful dishes she herself would have ordered, if she had a lover and he had taken her out.

How would it be to have an affair? Difficult, but surely worth it, if she could keep it from her husband. The problem of course was David. And now Jack worked a good deal of the time at home, and her father-in-law was visiting as well. And she could never have a lover at the house because of Erna Steiner next door. The big baggy hausfrau would see, comprehend and at once, out of a Prussian sense of duty, inform Jack. But then, wasn't the risk part of it? Didn't it help add that — flavor?

"What would your husband do if he found out?" she asked June. "Cut you to bits? Jack would."

June said, "Mike has had affairs of his own. He'd be sore and possibly he'd give me a black eye and go off for a week or so with one of his girl friends, leaving me stuck with the kids, of course. But he'd get over it."

To herself, Silvia wondered if Jack had ever had an affair. It did not seem probable. She wondered how she would feel if he had and she found out. Would it end the marriage? Yes, she thought. I'd get a lawyer right away. Or would I? There's no way to tell in advance...

"How are you and your father-in-law getting along?" June asked.

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"Oh, not badly. He and Jack and the Steiner boy are off somewhere, taking a business trip. I don't see much of Leo, actually. He came mainly on business. June, how many affairs have you had?"

"Six," June Henessy said.

"Gee," Silvia said. "And I haven't had any."

"Some women aren't built for it."

That sounded to Silvia like a rather personal, if not outright anatomical, insult. "What do you mean?"

"Aren't constituted psychologically," June explained glibly. "It takes a certain type of woman who can create and sustain a complex fiction, day after day. I enjoy it, what I make up to tell Mike. You're different. You have a simple, direct sort of mind. Deception isn't your cup of tea. Anyhow, you have a nice husband." She emphasized the authority of her judgment by a lifting of her eyebrows.

"Jack used to be gone all week long." Silvia said. "I should have had one then. Now it would be so much harder." She wished, fervently, that she had something creative or useful or exciting to do that would fill up the long empty afternoons. She was bored to death with sitting in some other lady's kitchen drinking coffee hour after hour. No wonder so many women had affairs. It was that or madness.

"If you're limited to your husband for emotional experience," June Henessy said, "you have no basis of judgment. You're more or less stuck with what he has to offer. But with experience you can tell better what your husband's deficiencies are, and it's much more possible for you to be objective about him. And what needs to be changed in him, you can insist that he change. And for your own part, you can see where you've been ineffective and with these other men you can learn how to improve yourself, so that you give your husband more satisfaction. I fail to see who loses by that."

Put that way, it certainly sounded like a good healthy idea for all concerned. Even the husband benefited.

While she sat sipping her coffee and meditating about that, Silvia looked out the window and saw to her surprise a 'copter landing. "Who's that?" she asked June.

"Heaven's sake, I don't know," June said, glancing out.

The 'copter rolled to a halt near the house. The door opened and a dark-haired, good-looking man wearing a bright nylon shirt and necktie, slacks and stylish European loafers stepped out. Behind him came a Bleekman who lugged two heavy suitcases.

Inside her, Silvia Bohlen felt her heart quiver as she watched the dark-haired man stroll toward the house, the Bleekman following with the suitcases. This was the way she imagined June's Tony to look.

"Gosh," June said. "I wonder who he is. A salesman?" A rap sounded at the front door and she went to open it. Silvia set down her cup and followed along. At the door June halted. "I feel sort of — undressed." She put her hand nervously to her shorts. "You talk to him while I run into the bedroom and change. I

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wasn't expecting anybody strange to drop by. You know, we have to be careful, we're so isolated and our husbands are away ... don't you agree?" She darted off to the bedroom, her hair flying.

Silvia opened the door.

"Good day," the good-looking man said, with a smile of perfect, white, Mediterranean teeth. He had a faint accent. "Are you the lady of the house?"

"I guess so," Silvia said, feeling timid and ill-at-ease. She glanced down at her own self, wondering if she were dressed modestly enough to be standing out here talking to this man.

"I wish to introduce a very fine line of health foods which you may be familiar with," the man said. He kept his eyes on her face, and yet Silvia had the distinct impression that somehow he managed at the same time to examine the rest of her detail by detail. Her self-consciousness grew, but she did not feel resentful. The man had a charming manner, simultaneously shy and yet oddly forthright.

"Health food," she murmured. "Well, I—"

The man gave a nod, and his Bleekman stepped up, laid down one of the suitcases and opened it. Baskets, bottles, packages ... she was very much interested.

"Unhomogenized peanut butter," the man declared. "Also dietetic sweets without calories, to keep your lovely slimness. Wheat germ, yeast. Vitamin E. That is the vitamin of *vitality* ... but of course for a young woman like yourself, not yet appropriate." His voice purred along as he indicated one item after another; she found herself bending down beside him, so close to him that their shoulders touched. Quickly she drew away, startled into apprehension.

At the door, June put in a momentary appearance, now wearing a skirt and a wool sweater. She hung about for a moment and then drew back inside and shut the door. The man failed to notice her.

"Also," he was saying, "there is much along the gourmet line that Miss might be interested in. These." He held up a jar. Her breath left her; it was caviar.

"Good grief," she said, magnetized. "Where did you get that?"

"Expensive, but well worth it." The man's dark eyes bored into hers. "Don't you agree? Reminder of days at Home, soft candle lights and dance music by an orchestra ... days of romance in a whirl of places delightful to the ear and eye." He smiled long and openly at her.

Black market, she realized.

Her pulse hammered in her throat as she said, "Look, this isn't my house. I live about a mile down along the canal." She pointed. "I—am very much interested."

The man's smile seared her.

"You've never been by before, have you," she said, now rattled and stammering. "I've never seen you. What's your name? Your firm name."

"I am Otto Zitte." He handed her a card, which she scarcely glanced at; she could not take her eyes from

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his face. "My business is long-established but has just recently — due to an unforeseen circumstance — been completely reorganized, so that now I am in a position to greet new customers direct. Such as yourself."

"You'll be by?"

"Yes, slightly later in the afternoon . . . and we can at leisure pore over a dazzling assortment of imported dainties which I have exclusive distribution of. Good afternoon." He rose cat-like to his feet.

June Henessy had reappeared. "Hello," she said in a low, cautious, interested voice.

"My card." Otto Zitte held the embossed white square out to her. Now both ladies had his card; each read hers intently.

Smiling his astute, insinuating brilliant smile, Otto Zitte beckoned to his tame Bleekman to lay out and open the other suitcase.

As he sat in his office at Camp Ben-Gurion, Doctor Milton Glaub heard a woman's voice in the corridor, husky and full of authority but still unmistakably feminine. Listening, he heard the nurse defer to her and he knew that it was Anne Esterhazy, come to visit her son Sam.

Opening the file he turned to *E*, and presently he had the folio *Esterhazy, Samuel* spread out before him on his desk.

It was interesting. The little boy had been born out of wedlock, a year or more after Mrs. Esterhazy had divorced Arnie Kott. And he had entered Camp B-G under her name, too. However it was undoubtedly Arnie Kott's progeny. The folio contained a great packet of information on Arnie, for, throughout, the examining doctors had taken that blood relationship for granted.

Evidently even though their marriage had long been over, Arnie and Anne Esterhazy still saw one another, enough in fact to produce a child. Their relationship therefore was not merely a business one.

For a time Doctor Glaub ruminated as to the possible uses that this information could be put to. Did Arnie have enemies? None that he knew of. Everybody liked Arnie — that is, everyone but Doctor Milton Glaub. Evidently Doctor Glaub was the sole person on Mars to have suffered at Arnie's hands, a realization that did not make him happier.

That man treated me in the most inhumane and cavalier fashion, he said to himself for the millionth time. But what could be done about it? He could still bill Arnie . . . hope to collect some trifle for his services. That, however, would not help. He wanted — was entitled to — much more. Again Doctor Glaub studied the folio. An odd sport, Samuel Esterhazy; he knew of no other case precisely like it. The boy seemed almost a throwback to some ancient line of near-man, or to some variant which had not survived: one which lived partly in the water. It recalled to Glaub the theory advanced now by a number of anthropologists that man had descended from aquatic apes who had lived in the surf and shallows.

Sam's I.Q., he noted, was only 73. A shame.

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— Especially so, he thought suddenly, in that Sam could beyond doubt be classified as mentally retarded rather than anomalous. Camp B-G had not been intended as an institution for the purely retarded, and its director, Susan Haynes, had sent back to their parents several pseudo-autistic children who had turned out to be nothing more than standard imbeciles. The diagnostic problem had hampered their screening, of course. In the case of the Esterhazy boy, there was also the physical stigmata...

No doubt of it, Doctor Glaub decided. I have the basis for it. I can send the Esterhazy child home. The Public School could teach him without trouble, could gear down to his level. It is only in the physical area that he could be called "anomalous," and it is not our task here to care for the physically disabled with our facilities.

But what is my motive? he asked himself.

Possibly I am doing it to get back at Arnie Kott for treating me in a cruel manner.

No, he decided, that does not seem probable; I am not the psychological type who would seek revenge. That is more the anal-expulsive or perhaps the oral-biting type. Long ago he had classified himself as the late genital type, devoted to the mature genital strivings.

On the other hand, his altercation with Arnie Kott had admittedly caused him to probe into the Esterhazy child's folio ... so there was a small but finite causal connective, after all.

Reading the folio through, he was struck once more by the bizarre relationship which it implied. Here they were, carrying on a sexual union years after their marriage had terminated. Why had they gotten divorced? Perhaps there had been a serious power-clash between them. Anne Esterhazy was clearly a domineering type of female, with strong masculine components, what Jung called the "animus-ridden" woman. In successfully dealing with such a type, one had to play a definite role. One had to capture the position of the authority right off the bat and never relinquish it. One had to be the ancestral spokesman, or else be quickly defeated.

Doctor Glaub put the folio away and then sauntered down the corridor to the P.E. room. He located Mrs. Esterhazy, playing beanbag with her boy. Walking over, he stood observing them until she became aware of him and stopped playing.

"Hello, Doctor Glaub," she said cheerfully.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Esterhazy. Um, when you're finished visiting, may I see you in my office?"

It was rewarding to see the woman's competent, self-satisfied expression wilt with concern. "Of course, Doctor Glaub."

Twenty minutes later he sat facing her across his desk.

"Mrs. Esterhazy, when your boy first came to Camp B-G, there was a good deal of doubt as to the nature of his problem. It was believed for some time that it lay in the realm of mental disturbance, possibly a traumatic neurosis or —"

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The woman broke in firmly. "Doctor, you're going to tell me that since Sam has no problems except his defective learning ability, he is not to remain here. Is that correct?"

"And the physical problem," Doctor Glaub said.

"But that is not your concern."

He made a gesture of resignation and agreement.

"When do I have to take him home?" She was white-faced and trembling. Her hands clutched at her purse.

"Oh, three or four days. A week."

Chewing her knuckle, Mrs. Esterhazy stared at the carpet of the office. Time passed. Then in a quavering voice she said, "Doctor, as you perhaps know, I have been active for sometime now in fighting a bill before the UN which would close Camp B-G." Her voice gained strength. "If I am forced to remove Sam, I will withdraw my assistance in this matter, and you can be certain that the bill will be passed. And I will inform Susan Haynes as to the reason why I am withdrawing my assistance."

A slow cold wave of shock passed over Doctor Milton Glaub's mind. He could think of nothing to say.

"You understand, Doctor?" Mrs. Esterhazy said.

He managed to nod.

Rising to her feet, Mrs. Esterhazy said, "Doctor, I have been in politics a long time. Arnie Kott considers me a do-gooder, an amateur, but I am not. Believe me, in certain areas I am quite shrewd politically."

"Yes," Doctor Glaub said, "I see that you are." Automatically he too rose. He escorted her to the door of the office.

"Please don't ever bring up this issue about Sam again," the woman said, as she opened the door. "I find it too painful. It is much easier for me to regard him as anomalous." She faced him squarely. "It is not within my capacity to think of him as retarded." Turning, she walked swiftly off, leaving Doctor Glaub.

That did not work out too well, Doctor Glaub said to himself as he shakily closed his office door. The woman is obviously sadistic. Strong hostility drives coupled with out-and-out aggression.

Seating himself at his desk he lit a cigarette and puffed at it despondently.

When Jack Bohlen reached the bottom of the descent ramp he saw no sign of Manfred. Several children trotted by, no doubt on their way to their Teachers. He began to roam about, wondering where the boy had gone. And why so quickly? It was not good.

Ahead, a group of children had collected around a Teacher, a tall, white-haired, bushy-browed gentleman whom Jack recognized as Mark Twain. Manfred, however, was not among them.

As Jack started past the Mark Twain it broke off its monologue to the children, puffed several times at its cigar and called after Jack, "My friend, can I be of any assistance to you?"

Pausing, Jack said, "I'm looking for a little boy that I brought here with me."

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"I know all the young fellows," the Mark Twain Teaching Machine answered. "What is his name?"

"Manfred Steiner." He described the boy as the Teaching Machine listened alertly.

"Hmmm," it said, when he had finished. It smoked for a moment, and then once more lowered its cigar. "I believe you will find that young man over colloquizing with the Roman Emperor Tiberius. Or at least so I am informed by the authorities in whose care this organization has been entrusted. I speak of the Master Circuit, sir."

Tiberius. He had not realized that such figures were represented here at the Public School, the base and deranged personages of history. Evidently from his expression the Mark Twain understood his thoughts.

"Here in the School," it informed him, "as an example not to be emulated but to be avoided with the most scrupulous zeal, you will find, sir, as you take your peregrinations about these halls, that many rascals, pirates and scamps are on display, sermonizing in their dolorous and lamentable tones their edifying histories for the enlightenment of the young." The Mark Twain, again puffing on its cigar, winked at him. Disconcerted, Jack hurried on.

At the Immanuel Kant he halted to ask directions. Several pupils, in their teens, stood aside for him.

"The Tiberius," it told him in heavily accented English, "can be found down that way." It pointed with absolute authority; it did not have any doubts, and Jack hurried at once down that particular hall.

A moment later he found himself approaching the slight, white-haired, fragile-looking figure of the Roman emperor. It seemed to be musing as he came up to it, but before he could speak it turned its head in his direction and said:

"The boy whom you are searching for has passed on. He was yours, was he? An exceeding attractive youth." Then it was silent, as if communing within itself. Actually, Jack knew, it was reconnecting itself with the Master Circuit of the School, utilizing all the Teaching Machines, now, in an attempt to locate Manfred for him. "He is talking to no one at this moment," the Tiberius said presently.

Jack went on, then. A sightless, middle-aged female figure smiled past him; he did not know who it was, and no children were conversing with it. But all at once it said, "The boy you want is with Philip Second of Spain." It pointed to the corridor to the right, and then it said in a peculiar voice, "Kindly hurry. We would appreciate it if you would remove him from the School as soon as possible. Thank you very much." It snapped off into silence. Jack hurried down the hall which it had pointed out.

Almost at once he turned a corridor and found himself before the bearded, ascetic figure of Philip the Second. Manfred was not there, but some intangible quality of his essence seemed still to hover in this area.

"He has only now departed, dear sir," the Teaching Machine said. Its voice had the same note of peculiar

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urgency as the female figure's, a moment ago. "Kindly find him and remove him. It would be appreciated."

Without waiting any longer, Jack plunged down the corridor, a chill fear biting at him as he ran.

"... much appreciated," a seated, white-robed figure said, as he passed it. And then, as he passed a gray-haired man in a frock coat, it, too, took up the School's urgent litany. "... soon as possible."

He turned the corner. And there was Manfred.

The boy was alone seated on the floor, resting against the wall, his head down, apparently deep in thought.

Bending down, Jack said, "Why did you run off?"

The boy gave no response. Jack touched him, but still there was no reaction.

"Are you all right?" Jack asked him.

All at once the boy stirred, rose to his feet and stood facing Jack.

"What is it?" Jack demanded.

There was no answer. But the boy's face was clouded with a blurred, distorted emotion that found no outlet. He gazed at Jack as if not seeing him. Totally absorbed in himself, unable to break out into the outside world.

"What happened?" Jack said. But he knew that he would never find out. No way existed for the creature before him to express itself. There was only silence, the total absence of communication between the two of them, the emptiness that could not be filled.

The boy looked away then, and settled back down into a heap on the floor.

"You stay here," Jack said to him. "I'll go have them get David for me." Warily, he moved away from the boy, but Manfred did not stir. When he reached a Teaching Machine, Jack said to it, "I would like to have David Bohlen, please. I'm his father. I'll take him home."

It was the Thomas Edison Teaching Machine, an elderly man who glanced up, startled, and cupped his ear. Jack repeated what he had said.

Nodding, it said, "Gubble gubble."

Jack stared at it. And then he turned to look back at Manfred. The boy still sat slumped down, his back against the wall.

Is it me? Jack asked himself. Is this the final psychotic breakdown for me? Or—

He could not believe the alternative; it simply was not possible.

Down the hall, another Teaching Machine was addressing a group of children; its voice came from a distance, echoing and metallic. Jack strained to listen.

"Gubble gubble," it was saying to the children.

He closed his eyes. He knew in a moment of perfect awareness that his own psyche, his own perceptions, had not misinformed him. It was happening, what he heard and saw.

Manfred Steiner's presence had invaded the structure of the Public School, penetrated its deepest being.

TO BE CONCLUDED

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THE LONELY

BY JUDITH MERRIL

ILLUSTRATED BY LUTJENS

If we practice our "Space Speech" and listen real hard—is this the sort of thing we're going to hear?

TO: The Hon. Natarajan Roi Hennessy, Chairman, Committee on Intercultural Relations, Solar Council, Eros.
FROM: Dr. Shlomo Mouna, Sr. Anthropologist, Project Ozma XII, Pluto Station.
DATE: 10/9/92, TC.
TRANSMISSION: VIA: Tight beam, scrambled. SENT: 1306 hrs, TST. RCVD: 1947 hrs, TST

Dear Nat:

Herewith, a much condensed, heavily annotated, and topsecret coded transcript of a program we just picked up. The official title is GU#79, and the content pretty well confirms some of our earlier assumptions about the whole series, as this one concerns us directly, and we have enough background information, including specific dates, to get a much more complete and stylistic translation than before.

I'd say the hypotheses that these messages represent a "Galactic University" lecture series broadcast from somewhere near Galactic Center, through some medium a damn sight faster than light, now seems very reasonable.

This one seemed to come from Altair, which would date transmission from there only a few years

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after some incidents described in script. Some of the material also indicates probable nature of original format, and I find it uncomfortable. Also reraises question of whether Altair, Arcturus, Castor, etc., relay stations are aimed at us? Although the content makes that doubtful.

Full transcript, film, etc. will go out through channels, as soon as you let me know which channels. This time I am not pleading for declassification. I think of some Spaserve reactions and—frankly I wonder if it shouldn't be limited to SC Intercult Chairmen and Ozma Sr. Anthropoids—and sometimes I wonder about thee.

Cheery reading.
Shlomo

TRANSCRIPT, GU#79, Condensed Version, edited by SM, 10/9/92, TC. (NRH: All material in parens is in my words—summarizing, commenting, and/or describing visual material where indicated. Straight text is verbatim, though cut as indicated. Times, measurements, etc., have been translated from Standard Galactic or Aldebaran local to Terran Standard; and bear in mind that words like "perceive" are often very rough translations for SG concepts more inclusive than our language provides for.—SM)

(Open with distance shot of Spaserve crew visiting Woman of Earth statue on Aldebaran VI. Closeup of reverent faces. Shots of old L-1, still in orbit, and jump-ship trailing it. Repeats first shot, then to Lecturer. You may have seen this one before. Sort of electric eel type. Actually makes sparks when he's being funny.)

The image you have just perceived is symbolic, in several senses. First, the statue was created by the Arlemites, the native race of Aldebaran VI (!! Yes, Virginia, there *are* aborigines!!) in an effort to use emotional symbols to bridge the gap in communications between two highly dissimilar species. Second: due to the farcical failure of this original intent, the structure has now become a vitally significant symbol —you perceived the impact—to the other species involved, the Terrans, a newly emerged race from Sol III. (Note that "you perceived." We must accept the implication that the original broadcasting format provides means of projecting emotional content.) Finally, this two-fold symbol relates in one sense (Shooting sparks like mad here. Professional humor pretty much the same all over, hey?) to the phenomenon of the paradox of absolute universality and infinite variety inherent in the symbolism.

(Next section is a sort of refresher-review of earlier lectures. Subject of the whole course appears to be, roughly, "Problems of disparate symbolism in interspecies communications." This lecture—don't laugh—is "Symbols of Sexuality." Excerpts from review:—)

The phenomenon of symbolism is an integral part of the development of communicating intelligence. Dis-

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tinctions of biological construction, ecological situation, atmospheric and other geophysical conditions, do of course profoundly influence the racially infantile phases of intellectual-emotional-social development in all cultures . . . (but) . . . from approximately that point in the linear development of a civilization at which it is likely to make contact with other cultures—that is, from the commencement of cultural maturity, following the typically adolescent outburst of energy in which first contact is generally accomplished . . . (He describes this level at some length in terms of a complex of: 1, astrophysical knowledge; 2, control of basic matter-energy conversions, "mechanical or psial;" 3, self-awareness of whole culture and of individuals in it; and 4, some sociological phenomena for which I have no referents.) . . . all cultures appear to progress through a known sequence of i-e-s patterns . . . (and) . . . despite differences in the *rate* of development, the composite i-e-s curve for mature cultural development of all known species is identical enough to permit reliable predictions for any civilization, once located on the curve.

(Then progresses to symbolism. Specific symbols, he says, vary even more, between cultures, than language or other means of conscious communication, as to wit—)

It is self-evident that the specific symbols utilized by, for instance, a septasexual, mechanophilic, auriphased species of freely locomotive discrete individuals, will vary greatly from those of, let us say, a mitotic, unicellular, intensely psioid, communal culture. (Which makes it all the more striking, that) it is specifically in the *use of symbols*, the general consciousness of their significance, the degree of sophistication of the popularly recognized symbols, and the uses to which they are put by the society as a whole, that we have found our most useful constant, so far, for purposes of locating a given culture on the curve.

(Much more here about other aspects of cultural development, some of which are cyclical, some linear —all fascinating but not essential to understanding of what follows.)

Sexuality has until recently been such a rare phenomenon among civilized species that we had casually assumed it to be something of a drawback to the development of intelligence. Such sexual races as we did know seemed to have developed in spite of their biological peculiarity, but usually not until after the mechanical flair that often seemed to accompany the phenomenon had enabled them to escape their planet of origin for a more favorable environment.

I say more favorable because sexuality does seem to develop as an evolutionary compensation where (some terms untranslateable, some very broad, but generally describing circumstances, like extra-dense atmosphere, in which the normal rate of cosmic radiation was reduced to a degree that inhibited mutation and thus, evolution) . . .

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As I said, this seemed almost a freak occurrence, and so it was, and is, here in the heart of the Galaxy. But in the more thinly populated spiral arms, the normal rate of radiation is considerable lower. It is only in the last few centuries that we have begun to contact with any considerable numbers of species from these sectors—and the incidence of sexuality among these peoples is markedly higher than before.

Recently, then, there has been fresh cause to investigate the causes and effects of sexuality; and there has been a comparative wealth of new material to work with.

(Here he goes into a review of the variety of sexual modes, ranging from two to seventeen sexes within a species, and more exotica-erotica of means, manners, and mores than a mere two-sexed biped can readily imagine. Restrain yourself. It's all in the full transcript.)

But let me for the moment confine myself to the simplest and most common situation, involving only two sexes. Recent investigations indicate that there is an apparently inevitable psychological effect of combining two essentially distinct subspecies in one genetic unit. (Sparks like mad.) I perceive that many of you have just experienced the same delight-dismay the first researchers felt at recognizing this so-obvious and so-overlooked parallel with the familiar cases of symbiosis.

The Terrans, mentioned earlier, are in many ways prototypical of sexuality in an intelligent species, and the usual and rather dramatic events on Aldebaran VI have added greatly to our insights into the psychology of sexuality in general.

In this culture, dualism is very deeprooted, affecting every aspect of the i-e-s complex: not just philosophy and engineering, but mathematics, for instance, and mystique.

This cultural attitude starts with a duality, or two-sided symmetry, of body structure. (Throughout this discussion he uses visual material—photos, diagrams, etc., of human bodies, anatomy, physiology, habitat, eating and mating habits, etc. Also goes off into some intriguing speculation of the chicken-or-egg type: is physical structure influenced by mental attitudes, or is it some inherent tendency of a chromosome pattern with *pairs* of genes from *pairs* of parents?)

In this respect, the Terrans are almost perfect prototypes, with two pairs of limbs, for locomotion and manipulation, extending from a central — single — abdominal cavity, which, although containing some single organs as well as some in pairs, is so symmetrically proportioned that the first assumption from an exterior view would be that everything inside was equally mirror-imaged. Actually, the main circulatory organ is single—though consisting of two valves; the main breathing apparatus is paired; the digestive system is single—although food intake is through an orifice with paired lips and two rows of teeth. In both "male" and "female" types, the organ of sexual contact is single, whereas the gamete-producers are pairs.

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There is a single, roundish head set on top of the abdomen, containing the primary sensory organs, all of which occur in pairs. Even the brain is paired!

I mentioned earlier that it is typical of the sexual races that the flair for physical engineering is rather stronger than the instinct for communication. This was an observed but little-understood fact for many centuries; it was not till this phenomenon of dualism (and triadism for the three-sexed, etc.) was studied that the earlier observation was clarified. If you will consider briefly the various primitive sources of power and transport, you will realize that—outside of the psi-based techniques—most of these are involved with principles of symmetry and/or equivalence; these concepts are obvious to the two-sexed. On the other hand, the principle of unity, underlying all successful communication—physical, verbal, psial, or other—and which is also the basis for the application of psi to engineering problems—is for these species, in early stages, an almost mystical quality.

As with most life-forms, the reproductive act is, among sexual beings, both physically pleasurable and biologically compulsive, so that it is early equated with religio-mystic sensations. Among sexual species, these attitudes are intensified by the communicative aspects of the act. (Cartoon-type diagrams here which frankly gave me to think a bit!) We have much to learn yet about the psychology of this phenomenon, but enough has been established to make clear that the concept of unity for these races is initially almost entirely related to the use of their sexuality, and is later extended to other areas—religion and the arts of communication at first—with a mystical—indeed often reverent attitude!

I hardly need to remind you that the tendencies I have been discussing are the primitive and underlying ones. Obviously, at the point of contact, any species must have acquired at least enough sophistication in the field of physics—quanta, unified field theory, and atomic transmutation for a start—to have begun to look away from the essentially blind alley of dualistic thinking. But the extent to which these Terrans were still limited by their early developmental pattern is indicated by the almost unbelievable fact that they developed ultra-dimensional transport *before* discovering any more effective channels of communication than the electromagnetic!

Thus their first contacts with older civilizations were physical; and, limited as they still are almost entirely to aural and visual communication, they were actually unable to perceive their very first contact on Aldebaran VI.

(Shot of Prof Eel in absolute sparkling convulsions goes to distance shots of planet and antiquated Earth spaceship in orbit: L-1 again. Then suborb launch drops, spirals to surface. Twenty bulky spacesuited figures emerge — not the same as in opening shots. This looks like actual photographic record of landing, which seems unlikely. Beautiful

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damn reconstruction, if so. Narration commences with Aldebaran date. I substitute Terran Calendar date we know for same, and accept gift of one more Rosetta Stone.)

This time is the year 2053. For more than six decades, this primitive giant of space has ployed its way through the restrictive medium of slowspace. Twice before in its travels, the great ship has paused.

First at Procyon, where they found the system both uninhabited and uninviting; and at the time they did not yet know what urgent cause they had to make a landing. (Our date for Procyon exploration, from L-1 log, is 2016, which fits.)

Then at Saiph, two decades later, when they could provide a bare minimum of hospitality—no more than safe footing for their launches, in which they would live while they tried to ensure their future survival. But this system's planets offered little hope. One Earth-size enveloped in horror-film type gases and nasty moistures. One more with dense atmosphere of high acid content: probe from ship corroded in minutes.)

They limped on. A half decade later they came to a time of decision, and determined not to try for the next nearest star system, but for the closest one from which their radio had received signs of intelligent life: Aldebaran.

What they had learned between Procyon and Saiph was that those of their crew who were born in space were not viable. The ship had been planned to continue, if necessary, long beyond the lifespan of its first crew. The Terran planners had ingeniously bypassed their most acute psychosocial problem, and staffed the ship with a starting crew of just one sex. Forty females started the journey, with a supply of sperm from one hundred genetically selected males carefully preserved on board.

Sex determination in this species is in the male chromosome, and most of the supply had been selected for production of females. The plan was to maintain the ship in transit with single sexed population, and restore the normal balance only at the end of the journey.

The Terrans have apparently reached a level of self-awareness that enables them to avoid the worst dangers of their own divisive quality, while utilizing the advantages of this special (pun intended—Prof. Eel was sparking again) ambivalence. Their biological peculiarities have, among other things, developed a far greater tolerance in the females for the type of physical constraints and social pressures that were sure to accompany the long slow voyage. Males, on the other hand, being more aggressive, and more responsive to hostile challenges, would be needed for colonizing a strange planet. (Dissertation on mammals here which says nothing new, but restates from an outsider's—rather admiring—viewpoint with some distinction. Should be a textbook classic—if we can ever release this thing.)

That was the plan. But when the first females born on the trip came to maturity, and could not conceive, the plan was changed. Three male infants were born to females of the original complement—less than half

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of whom, even then, were still alive and of child-bearing age.

(Well, he tells it effectively, but adds nothing to what we know from the log. Conflicts among the women led to death of one boy, eventual suicide of another at adolescence. Remaining mature male fails to impregnate known fertile women. Hope of landing while enough fertiles remained to start again pretty well frustrated at Saiph. Decision to try for first contact made with just five fertiles left, and nearest system eight light years off—with Aldebaran still farther. Faint fantastic hope still at landing, with just one child-bearer left—the Matriarch, if you recall?)

Remembering the reasons for their choice of Aldebaran, you can imagine the reaction when that landing party, first, lost all radio signals as they descended; then, could find no trace whatsoever—to their senses—of habitation. The other planets were scouted, to no avail. The signals on the Mother Ship's more powerful radio continued to come from VI. One wild hypothesis was followed up by a thorough and fruitless search of the upper atmosphere. The atmosphere was barely adequate to sustain life at the surface. Beam tracing repeatedly located the signal beacon in a mountain of VI, which showed—to the Terrans—no other sign of intelligent life.

The only logical conclusion was that they had followed a "lighthouse beacon" to an empty world. The actual explanation, of course, was in the nature of the Arlemites, the natives of Aldebaran VI.

Originating as a social-colonizing lichen, on a heavy planet, with—even at its prime—a barely adequate atmosphere, the Arlemites combined smallness of individual size with limited locomotive powers and superior air and water retentive ability. They developed, inevitably, as a highly psioid culture—as far to one end of the psichophysical scale as the Terrans are to the other. (My spelling up there. I think it represents true meaning better than "psycho".) The constantly thinning choice between physical relocation and a conscious evolutionary measure which this mature psioid race was far better equipped to undertake: the Arlemites now exist as a planet-wide diffusion of single-celled entities, comprising just one individual, and a whole species.

(Visual stuff here helps establish concept—as if you or I just extended the space between cells.)

It seems especially ironic that the Arlemites were not only one of the oldest and most psioid of peoples—so that they had virtually all the accumulated knowledge of the Galaxy at their disposal—but were also symbiote products. This background might have enabled them to comprehend the Terran mind and the problems confronting the visitors—except for the accidental combination of almost total psi-blindness in the Terrans, and the single-sexed complement of the ship.

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The visitors could not perceive their hosts. The hosts could find no way to communicate with the visitors. The full complement of the ship, eventually, came down in launches, and lived in them, hopelessly, while they learned that their viability had indeed been completely lost in space. There was no real effort to return to the ship and continue the voyage. The ranks thinned, discipline was lost, deaths proliferated. Finally, it was only a child's last act of rebelliousness that mitigated the futility of the tragedy.

The last child saw the last adult die, and saw this immobility as an opportunity to break the most inviolable of rules. She went out of the launch—into near-airlessness that killed her within minutes.

But minutes were more than enough, with the much longer time afterwards for examination of the dead brain. It was through the mind of this one child, young enough to be still partially free of the rigid mental framework that made adult Terrans so inaccessible to Arlemites, that the basis was gained for most of the knowledge we now have.

Sorrowingly, the Arlemites generated an organism to decompose the Terrans and their artifacts, removing all traces of tragedy from the planet's surface. Meanwhile, they studied what they had learned, against future needs.

The technological ingenuity of these young sexuals will be apparent when I tell you that only four decades after the departure of that ill-fated first ship, they were experimenting with ultra-dimensional travel. Even at the time of the landing at Aldebaran, ultra-di scouts were already exploring the systems closest to Sol. Eventually—within a decade after the child's death—one of these came to Aldebaran, and sighted the still-orbiting Mother Ship.

A second landing was clearly imminent. The Arlemites had still devised no way to aid this species to live in safety on their planet, nor did they have any means to communicate adequately with psi-negatives whose primary perceptions were aural and visual. But they did have, from the child's mind, a working knowledge of the strongest emotional symbols the culture knew, and they had long since devised a warning sign they could erect for visual perception. The statue of the Woman of Earth was constructed in an incredibly brief time through the combined efforts of the whole Arlemite consciousness.

They had no way to know that the new ship, designed for exploration, not colonizing, and equipped with ultra-di drive, which obviated the long slow traveling, was crewed entirely by males. Even had they known, they did not yet comprehend the extreme duality of the two-sexed double-culture. So they built their warning to the shape of the strongest fear-and-hate symbols of—a female.

(Shot of statue, held for some time, angle moving slowly. No narration. Assuming that emotional-projection notion—and I think we must—the timing here is such that I believe they first project what they seem to think a human female would

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feel, looking at it. I tried women on staff here. They focused more on phallic than female component, but were just as positive in reactions as males. ???? Anyhow, like I said, no narration. What follows, though out of parens, is my own reaction.

It seems more a return than a venture.

The Woman waits, as she has waited . . . always? . . . to greet her sons, welcome us . . . home? . . . She sits in beauty, in peacefulness, perfect, complete, clean and fresh-colored . . . new? . . . no, *forever* . . . open, welcoming, yet so impervious . . . warm and . . . untouchable? . . . rather, *untouched* . . . almost- but never, forgotten Goddess . . . Allmother, Woman of Earth . . . enveloped, enveloping, in warmth and peace . . .

One stands back a bit: this is the peace of loving insight, of unquesting womanhood, of great age and undying youth . . . the peace of the past, of life that is passed, of that immortality that nothing mortal can ever achieve except through the frozen impression of living consciousness that we call *art*.

The young men are deeply moved and they make jokes. "Allmother," one hears them say, sarcastically, "Old White Goddess, whaddya know?"

Then they look up and are quiet under the smiling stone eyes. Even the ancient obscenely placed spaceship in her lap is not quite absurd, as it will seem in museum models—or tragic, as is the original overhead.

(Prof. Eel goes on to summarize the conclusions that seem obvious to him. Something is awfully wrong; that's obvious to me. How did they manage to build something so powerful out of total miscomprehension? What are we up against, anyhow? And, to get back to the matter of channels, what do you think this little story would do to Spaserve brass egos? Do you want to hold it top secret a while?)

End of Transcript

TO: Dr. Shlomo Mouna, Sr. Anthropologist, Ozma XII, Pluto
FROM: N. R. Hennessy, Solar Council Dome, Eros
DATE: 10/10/92
TRANSMISSION: VIA tight beam, scrambled. SENT: 0312 hrs. RCVD: 1027 hrs.

Dear Shlomo:

Absolutely, let me see the full package before we release it elsewhere. I've got a few more questions, like: Do they know we're receiving it? How do we straighten them out? Or should we? Instinct says yes. Tactics says it is advantageous to be underestimated. Think best you come with package, and we'll braintrust it. Meantime, in reply to your bafflement—

"L" class ships, you should have known, are for "Lysistrata." Five of them launched during brief Matriarchy at beginning of World Government on Terra, following Final War. So sort out your symbols *now*.

And good grief, where did the *other* four land?

NRH

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TO SAVE EARTH

BY EDWARD W. LUDWIG

ILLUSTRATED BY VAN DOGEN

The life of everyone on Earth depended on their sanity . . . which they had long ago lost!

For more than six years the silver rocket was like a tomb buried at the Earth's center. It wore the blackness of interstellar space for a shroud, and ten thousand gleaming stars were as the eyes of hungry, waiting worms.

Five of the inhabitants of the rocket moved like zombies, stone-faced and dull-eyed, numb even to their loneliness.

The sixth inhabitant did not move at all. He sat silent and unseeing. The sixth inhabitant was mad.

There had been times when all of them — mad and near-mad — had forgotten that they hurtled through space, that they were men and that they were growing old. Occasionally they had even forgotten that the destiny of mankind might lie in their hands like a fragile flower to be preserved or crushed.

But now came a moment six years

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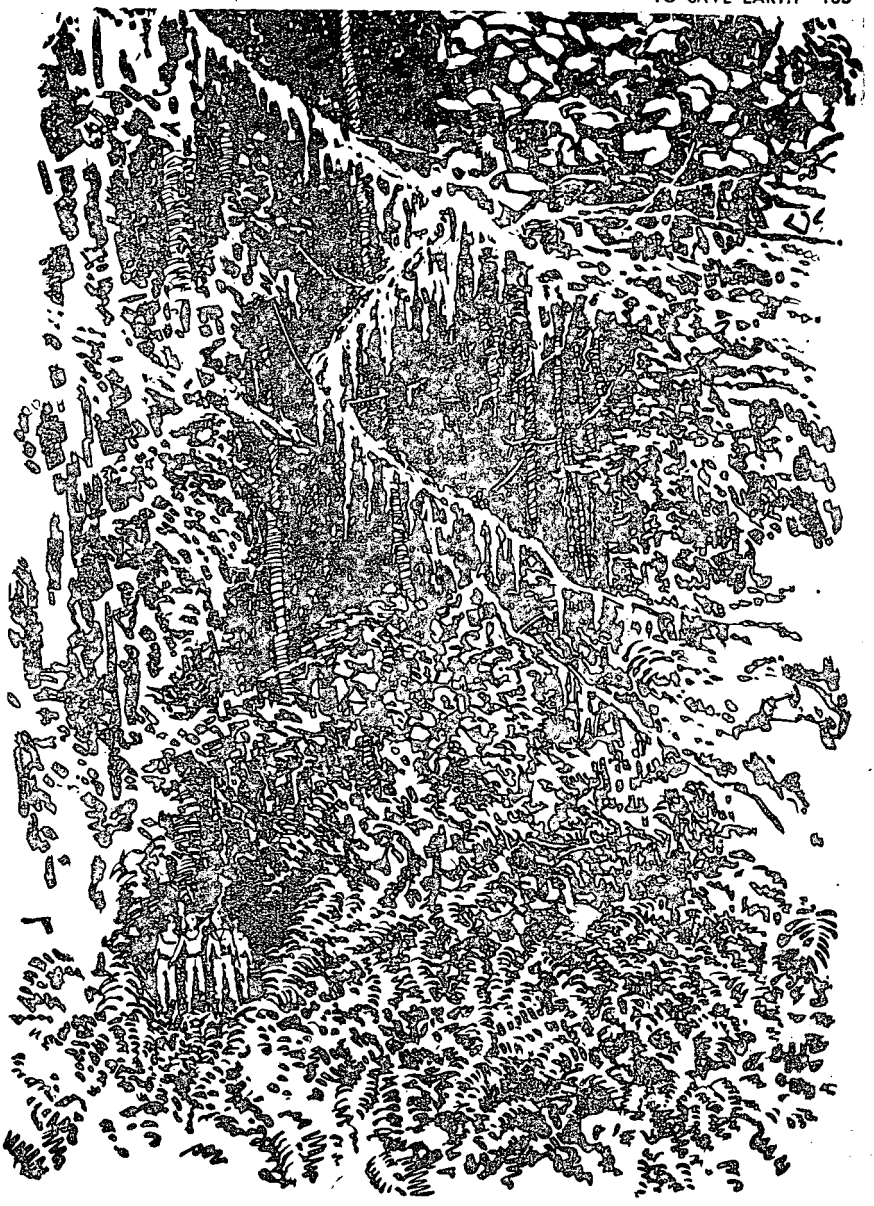

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one month and five days after their departure from Earth. The sole planet of Sirius loomed green and blue in the ship's magni-screen. The sight of the shining planet was like a heavenly trumpet call, a signal for resurrection.

The inhabitants stirred, rubbed their eyes, and tried to exhume forgotten hopes and memories from the lethargy of their minds...

"What do you think?" asked Lieutenant Washington.

Captain Jeffrey Torkel, gaunt-faced and gray, stiffened his lean body. At this moment all memory had left him; like a wind-tossed balloon leaping out of his skull.

It's happened again, he thought. *I've forgotten. Oh God, why must I keep forgetting?*

"Tell me what you think, Captain," said a balding, dark-skinned man clad in khakis.

Captain Torkel stared at the blue-green, cloud-mottled image in the screen. Where was he? Certainly not in South Dakota. Certainly not on a field of golden, bristling wheat. No, he had the feeling that much time had passed since those boyhood days on the Dakota farm.

He glanced at the strange man who had spoken to him. The balloon snapped back into his skull. Memory returned.

At least it wasn't gone for a week this time, he thought. *Thank you, God.*

"You must be thinking *something,*" persisted the man who had become Lieutenant Washington.

The captain rubbed his gray stubble of beard. "I guess I'm thinking that we're afraid and bewildered. We're not as full of strength and hope as saviors of the race should be. Sure, what we find here today will mean either life or death for the race. But the concept has been with us for too long. It's already made us half-mad. And the same part of our minds is afraid to hope lest it be disappointed. After all, the planet might be radioactive or uninhabitable, or—"

"But, Lord, Captain! Even with the sub-spatial drive it's taken us six years to get here. If there's a God who answers prayers, it's *got* to be a good planet. Sirius has only one planet. This is the last chance left for the race. And look at it, Captain! The blue places must be water and the green must be land. It's bigger than Earth, but it looks almost like it!"

Captain Torkel nodded. "Whether it's good or bad, we still can't win, really. If it's bad, humanity dies and we stay on the ship for the rest of our lives. If it's good, we'll still be on it for twelve more years — six years back to Earth and another six to return here."

Lieutenant Washington began to shake. "I don't know if I could take twelve more years in space. Twelve years of eating and sleeping and playing chess in the silence and nothing but darkness outside, and trying to find a micro-movie we haven't seen a hundred times — all that, over and over—" He closed his eyes. "I don't think the others could take it either. They'd probably become like Kelly."

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Kelly was the mad one.

"We have no other choice, Lieutenant. If the planet's habitable, we have to take the news back."

The lieutenant shuddered. "I — I need a drink," he faltered. "I know. I said I wasn't going to drink today. I'm not either. Not much. I want to be on my feet when we hit that planet. But — excuse me, Captain."

Captain Torkel watched the gaunt officer stride to the aft compartment. He suddenly realized that the lieutenant was bald. The top of his Negroid skull shone like a dark egg. When had *that* happened? Only a short time ago, it seemed, the lieutenant had been a young man with soft thick hair. *Those six years did it,* thought Captain Torkel, *those six dark, silent, crazy years.*

The lieutenant returned a few seconds later, calmer now, reeking with the stench of laboratory alcohol spilled on his jacket.

Captain Torkel, as always, pretended not to notice the stench.

"Captain," said Lieutenant Washington deeply.

"Yes?"

"Suppose the astrophysicists back on Earth were wrong. They said the sun would blow up in exactly twelve years, two months and fifteen days. How could they get it that close? Suppose this planet *is* habitable, suppose it *could* be a new home for humanity. And suppose we start back home with the news, and then the sun turns into a nova ahead of schedule — say, in twelve years, two months and *three* days, when we're still a week away."

Captain Torkel swallowed hard. "We have to allow a margin for error, of course. But I don't think those predictions will be off by more than a day or two. After all, they've been corroborated in all the broadcasts we've been able to pick up."

He smiled grimly. "So if the planet's habitable, we have to start back to Earth almost at once. We can't allow ourselves more than a day to rest and try to get the madness out of our systems."

"Oh, God," murmured Lieutenant Washington, closing his eyes.

"If we only had our transmitter," Captain Torkel mused, "we could stay here. We wouldn't have to—"

"Damn him," interrupted the lieutenant, opening his eyes and clenching his fists. "*Damn* him!"

"Kelly?"

"Kelly. Why did he do it, Captain? Why did he throw every piece of transmitting equipment overboard?"

"Maybe a part of his mind hated Earth. Maybe unconsciously he didn't want to save humanity. Kelly's crazy. You can't account for the actions of a crazy man."

Lieutenant Washington was shaking again. "And so we can't radio Earth about what we find. If the planet's good, we have to tell Earth the hard way—by traveling through space for six more years. Captain, I — I think I'm going to have to get a dr—"

Footsteps sounded on the deck behind them. Van Gundy, the lean, hawk-nosed jetman, rushed up to them. He was breathing heavily and trembling.

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"Captain, Fox stole my harmonica!"

Captain Torkel scowled. For a moment he forgot Van Gundy's name and who the lean man was. Then he remembered.

"Stole your harmonica. Why?"

"He won't tell me. He's a thief, Captain. He's always stealing things. You ought to—"

"Tell him I said for him to give it back to you. Tell him I said that."

"Yes, sir." Van Gundy clasped his trembling hands. "But that isn't all, Captain. Garcia said if I got my harmonica back and kept playing it, he'd kill me."

"Oh, God. Tell Garcia I said he couldn't."

"Yes, sir." Van Gundy turned toward the aft compartment, then spun back, eyes blazing. "I won't let 'em scare me, Captain. If they don't leave me alone. I'll kill *them*."

"The men are like rotting trees," said Captain Torkel a few moments later, "and you can't tell which way they'll fall. Fox steals. Van Gundy is afraid of everything and everybody. Garcia keeps breaking things and threatening violence. Someday he'll break a port, and that'll be *it*. Finis."

Lieutenant Washington said, with a hiccough, "Too bad we didn't insist on having a psychiatrist in the crew. Fox probably thinks he's been cheated out of his youth, and unconsciously he's trying to steal it back. Van Gundy has been knocked around so much that everything in the universe is a source of terror to him. Garcia breaks things."

He laughed sourly, blowing hot alcoholic breath into the captain's face. "And me, I'm a dipso who's no good to himself or anyone. You, Captain . . . sometimes I suspect that your memory isn't quite what it use to be."

Captain Torkel scratched his stubbled chin. "Six psycho-specimens trying to save humanity. How did we become so detestable? Are all Earthmen like us?"

"Don't you remember?"

"Remember?"

"Yes. How when the U. N. announced about the blowup every interstellar rocket and spaceman in the System was commissioned to discover new worlds. Each ship was given a destination and an interstellar ether-radio to send back its findings. Mechanics and technicians still on Earth were put to work building new rockets to carry the race to its future home — if one were found. We and the *Star Queen* were at the bottom of the barrel. The oldest ship; the crew that ordinarily would have been grounded."

Captain Torkel murmured, "I remember. There were fourteen interstellar ships then. Six cracked up smashing through the Einstein Barrier, according to what we picked up on the ether receiver. The others reached their destinations and not one found a habitable world. And newer ships sent out later had no better luck. Now, all the nearest star systems have been reached, and there isn't time for the ships to go on to other systems. By an ugly little prank of Fate, we're Earth's last chance."

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He straightened. He pressed the warning buzzer and flicked on the rocket's intercom.

"All hands to their crash-chairs," he intoned.

II

The crewmen appeared in the rear of the control room. Hesitantly, they approached the massive, semicircular control panel with its hundred flashing red and blue lights.

Fox was in the lead.

"Captain," the small-boned, brown-bearded radarman said solemnly, "can we take a look before we belt down?"

"A short one."

The men looked.

Fox seemed ready to kiss the image of the planet. Van Gundy, wide-eyed, trembled before it as if at any instant it might destroy him. Garcia, the swarthy engineer, glowered at it as though threatening to crush it like an eggshell.

"I want Kelly to see this," said Fox. He hurried aft, nervously stroking his beard.

An instant later he returned, leading the former radioman by the hand. Kelly's soft blue eyes stared vacantly out of a pink, cherubic face. He was as plump as a dumpling, and his hair was as red as prairie fire. His short body moved woodenly.

"Come on, Kelly," said Fox. "You got to see this. Nobody's going to stop you from seeing this, by God."

The fire-haired man stood before the magni-screen.

Fox pointed. "See it?"

Kelly stared.

"He can't see it," rumbled Garcia. "He's crazy."

"Not too crazy to see this," Fox retorted.

Kelly's head bent forward. His lip quivered. "Home," he mumbled.

Fox jerked, eyes widening. "Hey, Kelly spoke! Did you hear that? He spoke! First time in two years!"

"Home," Kelly mumbled again.

"No, not home," Fox explained. "It's the only planet of Sirius."

"Hell," said Garcia, "if it'll make him happier, let him think it's Earth."

"No, it's the only planet of—"

"We can't be saying 'the only planet of Sirius' all the time. We got to give it a name."

"Home," mumbled the madman.

"What kind of a name would *that* be?" growled Garcia.

Captain Torkel said, patiently, "Kelly didn't mean that for a name. He was just saying the word."

Fox cried, "Let's name it after Kelly. Kelly's Planet!"

Van Gundy stepped forward. He was trembling. His trembling seemed as much a part of him as sight in his eyes. "No," he said.

"Why not?" snapped Fox.

"Because of what he did. He took the transmitter and—"

"We know all that. He couldn't help it. He's a schizophrenic. That doesn't mean we can't name a world after him, does it?"

Garcia balled his hands into fists. "Fox is right. I say we call it Kelly's Planet. How about it, Captain?"

"It's all right with me," said the captain.

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"Then Kelly's Planet it is!" cried Fox.

"Strap down," Captain Torkel said. "This is it. We're going to land."

Then he said the words again in his mind: *This is it. This is the world that will give death or life to humanity, madness or sanity to us.*

The midnight blackness of space dissolved into gentle twilight as the *Star Queen* slid into the atmosphere of Kelly's Planet. The grumble of the jets became audible and then swelled until it was like a rebirth of the thunderous sound of an April takeoff more than six years ago.

Captain Torkel switched on the second layer of bow jets, braced himself in his crash-chair. Despite the effects of the deceleration compensator, his face was swollen and distorted. It was as if the soul was bubbling out of his body.

He realized that he should have commenced deceleration some ninety minutes ago. But he had forgotten.

The image of the planet broadened in the magni-screen. It filled the screen, then seemed to spill out of it. Captain Torkel beheld an expanse of blue which, in a silent explosion, was transformed into the cerulean calm of a sea. The blue was swept away. The brownish gold of mountains stabbed briefly upward, faded into the shadowy green of rushing forest. Then came the glassy green of a meadow.

The *Star Queen* paused, shaking with vibration. Its nose arched upward.

The *Star Queen* landed with an almost imperceptible thump. The atomic engines spluttered, coughed, died. The men unbuckled themselves, tested their limbs, slid off their chairs. They moved to the portholes like frightened old men treading on slippery ice.

They looked out.

They stared for a long moment. "I don't believe it," said Fox at last. "It's a mirage. We're still in space."

"It — it frightens me," stuttered Van Gundy. "There's death out there. The air is poisonous. I feel it."

"We're crazy," Garcia spat. "As crazy as Kelly." His eyes widened. "Or maybe we're dead. Could that be?"

"E — excuse me, Captain," said Lieutenant Washington. "I think I'll go aft for a minute."

Captain Torkel said nothing. He had forgotten where he was. He was nameless and lost, among strangers in a strange place.

But at this moment he somehow did not care. He was content to let his hungry gaze absorb the rainbow beauty beyond the ports.

The meadow was like molten emerald stirring lazily in a slight breeze. The meadow was spotted with flowers as large as a man's head, shaped like teardrops, and shining purple and yellow and blue and crimson in the light from a swollen, blood-red sun.

Some five hundred yards away on the rocket's starboard side rose a towering green forest. In its shadow was a dark jungle of colossal fern and twisted vines and more flowers. Beyond that, far away, snow-cloaked

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mountains stretched their ponderous bulk into sea-blue sky.

Captain Torkel returned his slow glaze to the interior of the strange place in which he stood. He beheld a group of strange men doing strange things.

A stern-looking man with tight lips and menacing eyes was looking up from a litter of glass flasks and electronic devices. "Air twenty-nine per cent oxygen — a bit higher than on Earth. Sixty-five per cent nitrogen. Rest is a mixture of water vapor, CO2 and inert gases."

A small-boned man with a brown beard was saying, "Mass point-eight-three. That and the increased oxygen should make us feel like kids again."

A hawk-nosed man with trembling hands and a forehead glistening with perspiration said, "Temperature sixty-four Fahrenheit. No harmful radiation, pathogenic tests negative. Air pressure, eleven-point-three."

He pointed to an odd-looking flower and a tuft of grass in the window of a metal, box-like chamber. "Flora shows the same oxygen-CO2 cycle as on Earth. Only the flowers here seem edible."

The men looked at one another.

"Captain, is everything all right?" the brown-bearded man asked anxiously.

Captain Torkel sensed that the strange men desired an affirmative answer from him. "Yes," he said.

The brown-bearded man clapped his hands. "And we can go outside! How about it, Captain? Can we go outside without our suits? Can we go out now—please?"

Click.

Memory returned to Captain Torkel like water crashing out of a broken dam and into a barren valley. He blinked and took a deep breath.

The three men before him became Garcia and Fox and Van Gundy. He saw that Kelly was still strapped in his crash-chair. He did not see Lieutenant Washington, but from the aft compartment came a faint tinkling of glassware.

"Yes," he said, "we'll go outside. But first someone should go alone — just in case. Who'll volunteer?"

"Not me," said Van Gundy. "You can't depend on those tests. There's death out there. The whole human race will die out if it comes here,"

"Why not let Kelly go?" asked Fox. "It's his planet.

"Sure," said Garcia. "If he dies, it'd serve him right, after what *he* did."

Captain Torkel thought, *It may be a dangerous planet. The captain ought to go first. He shouldn't send a madman to do a captain's job.*

"Let Kelly go first," he said, hating himself.

Fox helped Kelly out of the crash-chair, pushed him to the airlock.

"Go on, Kelly. This is your planet. You'll be the first to set foot on it."

Kelly did not move.

Fox pulled him to a port. "Look out there, Kelly. Damn it, don't keep looking at your feet. Out there, out the port!"

Fox raised Kelly's head and brushed the red hair back from his eyes.

The madman looked.

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"Heaven?" he whispered.

"Not Heaven. Kelly's Planet. Your planet, Kelly."

They pushed Kelly into the airlock. A minute later they saw him stumble onto the green meadows. For eleven more minutes he stood silent and motionless. Then he turned toward the rocket. Through the ports the men saw his lips move.

"Heaven!" yelled Fox. "That's what he said! He said 'Heaven'!"

III

Captain Torkel and Fox and Garcia and Van Gundy stood beside Kelly. Lieutenant Washington, too drunk to stand, sprawled in the grass.

They let the cool, clean air wash out their lungs like sweet perfume. They took off their shoes. They dug their toes into the soft, silky grass. They sniffed the poignant, spicy smell of the brilliant flowers.

Van Gundy, despite his trembling, played *Turkey in the Straw* on his harmonica. Captain Torkel did a dance like that of a Russian Cossack. Lieutenant Washington, squatting like a dark Buddha and with his torso swaying drunkenly, clapped his hands in time with the dance. Fox hummed the tune, and even Kelly nodded his head rhythmically. Only Garcia stood motionless.

"It's a good planet!" exclaimed Fox at last.

Van Gundy's trembling hand whacked spit out of his harmonica. His eyes rolled fearfully toward the forest. "We don't know for sure yet."

"I think Fox is right," said Captain Torkel. "It *is* a good planet. Enjoy it, men. Breathe deeply. Smell those flowers. Feel the grass. Because very soon we've got to start Earthward. We've got to store our memories full of this beauty so it'll last for twelve years."

"Oh, God," sighed Fox. "Twelve years."

Garcia stepped forward, swelling his chest. Strangely, it seemed that all the hatred had been drained out of him. "I was wrong," he said. "We're not crazy and we're not dead. This planet is good. It's so good that I'd like to stay here as long as I live."

"What?" asked Captain Torkel, blinking.

"I said I'd like to stay here as long as I live."

The words echoed in the still air. They were like evil seeds, falling into fertile minds and sprouting.

"And not go back to Earth?" asked Fox, stroking his beard.

"And not go back to Earth."

Captain Torkel stiffened. "Get those thoughts out of your head, Garcia. There are two billion people back on Earth. They'll die unless we tell them about this planet. We've got wives, friends—"

"Not me," said Garcia sternly. "No wife and no friends."

Fox shrilled, "The only reason I volunteered for this trip was to get away from my wife and that lousy New York apartment. You're not married, are you, Captain?"

"N — no."

"Me neither," hiccoughed Lieutenant Washington. "Not many girls'll marry spacemen."

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"Kelly's married, though," mused Fox. "How about it, Kelly?"

"Heaven," mumbled Kelly.

Fox laughed. "Kelly means he wants to stay here."

Captain Torkel wiped perspiration from his upper lip with the back of his hand. "We got to get these thoughts out of our minds. We're talking like murderers. Garcia, think of the people you used to know. Think of their faces. Imagine how it would be for them to die."

Garcia looked up into the sky, his features softening. "I can't remember any faces, Captain. I can remember how the gulls used to fly over the coast at Monterey and how the fishing boats used to bounce over the waves. That's all. The gulls and the boats will be destroyed anyway. We can't save those."

Captain Torkel turned to Fox. "*You* remember faces, don't you, Fox?"

The little man shrugged. "They're like those crowd scenes we used to see in movies — hundreds and thousands of faces all huddled together. You really can't remember a single one. They're like shadows."

"But you remember your wife's face."

"I don't want to remember that. I might vomit. And I don't want to remember that cheesy New York apartment either."

In desperation the captain turned to Van Gundy. "And you?"

"I — I remember the face of an old woman who sold flowers on O'Farrell Street in Frisco. Stood there all year long, she did. In winter, summer, spring, fall. I used to buy gardenias from her when I had a date."

"Do you want her to die?"

"She was so old that she's probably dead by this time anyway. But listen, Captain, I — I'm not sure yet that this planet—"

Captain Torkel whirled frantically to Lieutenant Washington, kicked him lightly in the side. The lieutenant, apparently somewhat sobered by the cool air, rose shakily.

"Lieutenant, *you* remember the people of Earth. Can't you still see their faces in your mind?"

"The only face I remember," drawled Lieutenant Washington, "is my Mom's. A good face, with a lot of work in it, but thin around the lips and wrinkled around the eyes. It was a cold face, though. Mom was born in Louisiana and then moved up to Maine as a girl. Her bones weren't the kind to take those New England winters. So Mom slept, ate, lived and died cold. Been dead now for eight years, and I think she's still cold, even in her grave. I don't believe Mom'd mind one bit if the Earth burns up. She'd be warm then. I think she'd like it."

"That's not the point," said Captain Torkel angrily. "The point is—"

Fox broke in: "What do *you* remember, Captain?"

Captain Torkel swallowed hard. "Me? Why, I remember, I—" His mouth remaining open, he scratched the back of his neck. His memories suddenly vanished like puffs of smoke.

"Just like the rest of us!" burst Garcia, triumphantly.

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"You know, Captain," said Fox, "if we didn't go back, the race wouldn't have to roast. People would still escape in their emergency rockets."

"But they wouldn't know where to go. They'd float around a few years, and then those flimsy mass-production ships would break up. Good Lord, men, we've got to act like human beings!"

Garcia stepped forward. "Why don't we decide this later? Can't we relax for a few hours, Captain?"

Lieutenant Washington nodded agreement. "He's right. You said yourself, Captain, that if the planet was good we'd spend a day or so getting the madness out of our systems."

"All right," murmured Captain Torkel, shoulders drooping. "We'll look around some more."

They walked toward the forest. Fox led Kelly by the hand. Lieutenant Washington advanced under his own power.

They saw trees five hundred feet high with brown trunks like twisted, lumpy crullers and leaves like elephant ears of green velvet. From smaller trees hung fruit that shimmered like golden snow as light touched it. Here and there were clusters of scarlet berries as large as apples, and chocolate-brown balls the size of coconuts.

"Don't touch 'em," said Van Gundy, trembling. "I'll bet they're deadly poison."

"They look delicious," said Captain Torkel, stuffing three specimens in his knapsack, "but we'll test them first."

Van Gundy screamed.

The others whirled to look at him.

Van Gundy, speechless, pointed with a trembling forefinger.

A brown, smiling face broke out of the fern foliage. Then another appeared, and another and another.

A score or more of brown-skinned humanoids walked up to them.

IV

The Sirians were dressed in loin cloths as bright and multicolored as the tear-shaped meadow flowers. Their resemblance to Earthmen made Captain Torkel gasp.

He could discern no appreciable difference save for the perfect roundness of their dark eyes and a slight elongation of their ears. Their flesh was golden tan.

"Well, hello!" said Captain Torkel.

The Sirians moved toward him, with such grace that they seemed not men striding through the singing forest, but part of the living trees and ferns and flowers.

"Hello," echoed the foremost Sirian, smiling. He was a young man, about thirty by Earth standards, with long black hair and wide, muscular shoulders. His handsome face reminded Captain Torkel of romantic Latin heroes in the micro-movies aboard the *Star Queen*.

Captain Torkel pointed to the sky. "We come from up there, from another world."

The Sirian's eyes were like black lights spearing into the captain's skull. "Yes, you come from star. You are Star People. Where is your star?"

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"It's a long way—"

"Hey, he spoke in English!" cried Fox. "What the hell!"

"I — I'm going back to the rocket," stammered Van Gundy, shaking.

"Lord, I need a drink," murmured Lieutenant Washington, stepping back with Van Gundy.

"Wait, all of you," Captain Torkel commanded them. To the Sirian he said, "We know that Earthmen haven't been here before. How do you speak our language?"

The young man's smile broadened. "Your mind is a fire sending out warmth to us. Within the warmth I see sounds you use to make words."

"Telepathy," said Captain Torkel.

"Yes," the Sirian agreed. "And I see that your people are troubled. They fear a strange thing — a coming of heat and light. Your world is soon to be destroyed, yes?"

Suddenly the captain was afraid. The fear came to him in an invisible cloud, settling over him, seeping into his flesh and chilling his bones. He tried to believe that it was the senseless fear of a child whose imagination has peopled the dark corners of his room with nameless monsters. He tried to crush the fear, but it clung to him in fog-cold intensity.

The Sirian nodded understandingly. "You must not worry now about the coming of the great heat. You are tired. You must come with us to our village. You must see how we live."

The captain's legs were weak. He wanted to flee; he wanted to escape from the Sirian's omnipresent smile and his round-eyed piercing gaze.

Van Gundy whispered to him, very softly, "Did you bring weapons, Captain? Should we go without weapons?"

"I — I forgot about weapons," he whispered back, his face reddening.

Fox said anxiously, "How about it, Captain? Do we go with them?"

"I don't want to go," said Van Gundy, trembling. "Don't make me go, Captain."

"I'll be damned if I'll go," muttered Garcia. "I'm going back to the rocket."

Captain Torkel nodded. "You two can go back to the rocket."

Fox leaned forward. "The rest of us can go, can't we?"

Captain Torkel frowned at Fox and Lieutenant Washington and Kelly. The fear was still in him, but he said softly, "All right, we'll go."

Garcia and Van Gundy ran back toward the *Star Queen,* white-faced, shoulders hunched. Captain Torkel and Fox and Kelly and Lieutenant Washington, led by the young Sirian, stumbled down a wide forest trail. Other Sirians darted on either side of them and behind them, half hidden by the thick foliage. They were like happy, dancing nymphs. Every second or two the forest echoed their clear, melodious laughter.

"We forgot to introduce ourselves," Captain Torkel said to the Sirian. "My name is Torkel, Captain Jeffrey Torkel."

"My name is Taaleeb," replied the Sirian.

"A pretty name. You are the leader of your people?"

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The Sirian's smile gave way to uncertainty. "Leader — that is a strange thought in your mind. We have no leaders."

"But you *must* have leaders."

"Why?" asked the Sirian, his eyes wide. "We have no star-boat. We are not going anyplace."

The captain cleared his throat. "We have leaders not only in our rockets. We have them to help us make our laws, to supervise our work, to guide us in the decisions of our living."

The Sirian laughed like a happy child. "Laws, work — more strange thoughts. We do not have laws. We do not have work."

A scowl creased Captain Torkel's forehead. "But you *must* do work of some kind. What do you do all the time?"

"We pick fruit from the trees and make love and sing and sleep and lie in the forest and make up poems. Is there anything else to do?"

"But when you build shelters or make clothes — *that* is work."

Taaleeb laughed again. "No, no. Building a shelter or making clothes is just building a shelter or making clothes."

They came to the village. It lay in circle of domes about eight feet high that reflected the same shining colors as the meadow flowers. Whether they were wooden, metallic or vegetable Captain Torkel could not tell.

"This is where we live," said Taaleeb proudly.

Captain Torkel nodded.

Then he saw the women coming toward them.

He felt the hair rise on the nape of his neck. For an instant he thought he was going to fall backward. Somehow he caught himself and managed to remain erect.

The women stood in a line in the center of the clearing as if gathered to meet the Earthmen. Like the men, they were clad only in loincloths. They were bronzed, sultry young goddesses.

The captain's gaze traveled over the nearest, a girl of perhaps twenty. His gaze began with her midnight hair that cascaded to firm, round breasts in a shower of black silk. It turned to her piquant, up-turned nose and dimpled cheeks and pink, sensual mouth. It fell to the slim, full body and the sweep of long, tanned thigh.

The girl smiled at him. Her eyes were like wells of interstellar space silvered with sparkling stars.

He sat down on his haunches, too weak to stand. He'd almost forgotten that women of flesh and blood existed. He'd almost begun to believe that women were memories hidden in dark corners of his mind or flickering images striding across a micro-movie screen.

"We have presents for you," the young Sirian said, smiling down at him.

Captain Torkel forced his eyes away from the girl. He saw that older women and children were standing beside him, smiling, their arms filled with strange containers.

"Wine for the Star People," said a white-haired woman. She seized a golden flagon and filled golden cups held by children.

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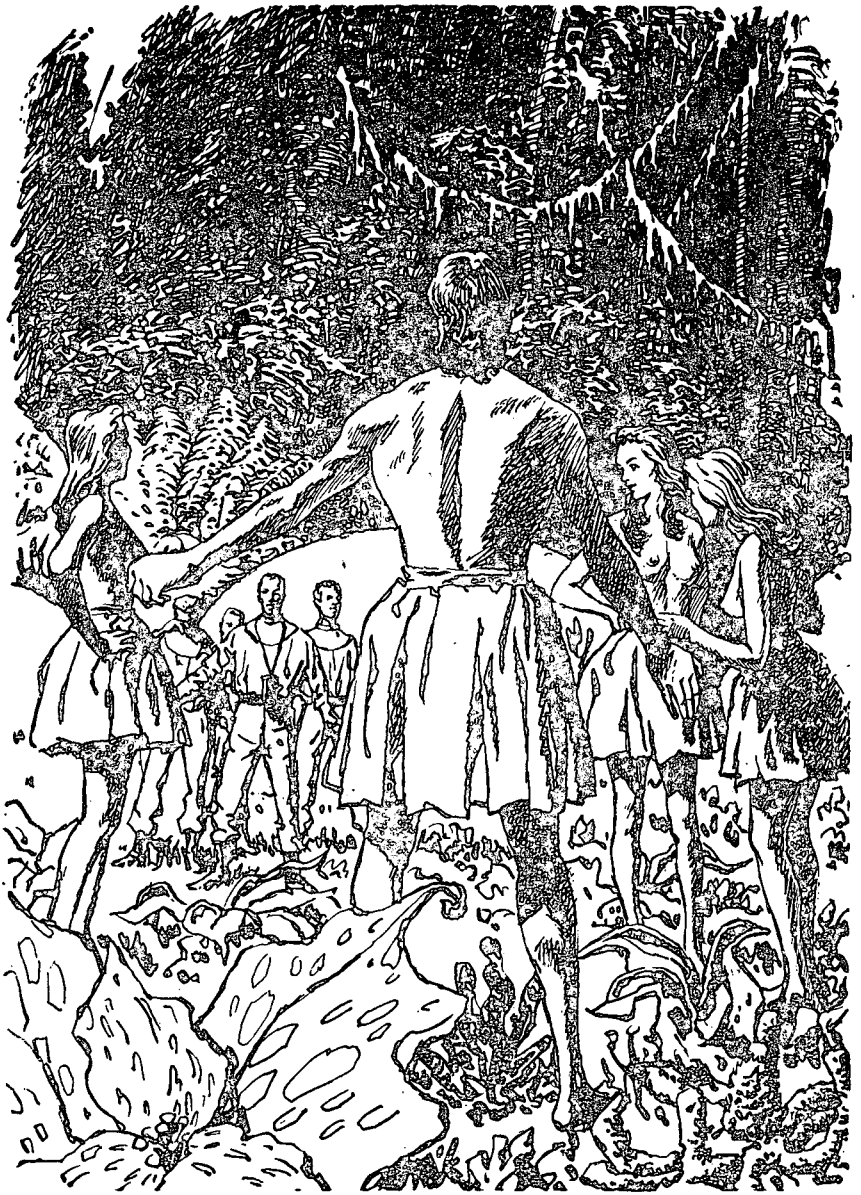

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"Food for the Star People," said another.

More smiling women and children appeared carrying greenish, transparent bowls filled with slices of a yellow, porous substance.

Taaleeb chuckled at Captain Torkel's hesitancy. "It is good food," he said. "Everything is good. There is no end to food and no end to wine. There is plenty for all."

Lieutenant Washington and Fox and Kelly squatted beside Captain Torkel, accepting the strange bowls and the golden flagons.

Fox whispered, "Captain, shall we let Kelly test the food first? It *could* be poisonous."

"Let Kelly test it first," murmured Captain Torkel, hating himself again.

Fox stuffed a slice of the yellow food into Kelly's mouth. The fire-haired man gulped and blinked and grinned like a summer sunrise.

"Heaven," he mumbled.

Suddenly Captain Torkel froze. "Wait. Can't you see what these people are trying to do? They can read our minds. They know that we'll probably bring millions and millions of people to their planet, that we'll probably overrun their civilization. They don't want us to go back to Earth. They want us to stay here. They're just pretending—"

He stopped as he saw the bronzed form of Taaleeb towering above him.

"You are wrong," said the Sirian, and it seemed that his smile faded ever so slightly, and a muscle in his cheek twitched almost imperceptibly. "Your thoughts are not good. We will welcome the people of your star — those who survive the long journey. We will be sorry to see you leave so soon. You leave in one day, yes? Then we will try to make your visit pleasant. Now, you must eat and drink. Be gay, my good friends."

Captain Torkel grunted. Reluctantly, he tasted the yellow food. It was delicious as a golden-brown fried chicken on Earth. His mood lightened.

He saw that it wouldn't be necessary to test the wine on Kelly. Lieutenant Washington had already emptied his flagon. It was now being refilled.

"Wine, Captain," said the smiling Sirian. "You must try our wine.

Captain Torkel cautiously raised the shining flagon to his lips. He sipped. It was more than wine. It was a sparkling, bubbling nectar of the gods. His throat and stomach glowed under its stimulating warmth. An almost miraculous sense of peace and well-being flooded through his body. It was as if he had become a god.

"More?" asked Taaleeb.

"Well — just a little."

Captain Torkel drank again. To Lieutenant Washington, he said, "I guess I was wrong. The Sirians are fine people. They really do like us."

The lieutenant drained his golden flagon. "I'm sure of it."

"Me, too," said Fox, pouring more of the sparkling liquid into Kelly's mouth. "I'd like to stay here always."

"Heaven," gurgled Kelly.

"You like the wine?" asked the smiling Sirian.

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"Yes!"

"You relish our food?"

"Of course!"

"You are pleased with the daughters of our village?"

Captain Torkel shook with desire. "Quite pleased. They are beautiful."

"Each of you would like one of our daughters to stay with you during your visit here?"

Captain Torkel gulped. There was a movement among the women as of wind stirring through tall grass. The tall, lissome bodies stepped closer to the Earthmen.

"I, er—"

"I think we would," said Fox, nodding eagerly.

"Then each of you may pick a companion," said Taaleeb. "Perhaps you would like to select two for your friends who did not come to our village."

Captain Torkel rose, swallowing hard. He bowed shakily to the girl nearest him. "Would you—"

The girl smiled and stepped to his side.

Lieutenant Washington wiped perspiration from his bald head. He pointed. "I'll take you," he said thickly. "And you two for Garcia and Van Gundy."

"Garcia and Van Gundy may not want companions," said Captain Torkel.

"Don't be silly."

Eyes shining, Fox selected a tall, lean-faced girl. Then he pulled Kelly forward. "Kelly, pick yourself out a companion."

Kelly belched.

"Pick out one of the girls, you idiot. Which one do you want?"

Kelly stared glassily at the waiting, watching figures.

"All."

"No, Kelly, you can't have them all. Just one. Pick out one. No, I'll pick one out for you." Fox nodded at one of the girls. She laughed and came to Kelly.

Captain Torkel downed the rest of his wine. "Now we'll return to the rocket with our companions."

Taaleeb cocked his head, widening his omnipresent smile. "But your companions must wash and scent themselves and select the proper clothing. They must make themselves ready. You will return here tonight as the sun falls into the forest."

"Oh," said Captain Torkel, slumping. Then he shrugged. "We'll see you tonight then."

His gaze turned to Fox. His mouth tightened.

"Fox," he said sternly.

"Hummm?"

"Put it back."

Fox's brows lifted innocently.

"Put back the cup. Take it out of your pocket."

Pouting like a disappointed child, Fox placed the stolen cup on the ground.

"The bowl, too."

Fox's lips formed a silent curse. He put down the bowl that he'd hidden under his armpit.

Taaleeb stepped forward. "No, this must not be. Your friend must keep the cup and the bowl. Keep, please." He placed the objects in Fox's hands. "There are our gifts to our friends." His eyes twinkled slyly.

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"I say just one more thing," he went on, his suggestive gaze wandering over the faces of the Earthmen. "It is such a pity that you think of leaving us. If you would stay with us always, you would be not only as friends to us, but also as gods. You would, if you wished, have a different companion every night. Your stomachs would have all the wine and food they could hold. We would build you a most big and most pretty house. Your friend—" he nodded at Fox— "your friend could take whatever his fingers desired. Your other friend — your thoughts call him Garcia — could break whatever he wanted. Your other friend, whose name I see as Van Gundy, would never have to be afraid again. Will you tell these promises to your Garcia and your Van Gundy?"

"We'll tell them," said Fox, quickly.

V

They waved good-by and started down the forest trail.

They began to sing the first song that popped into their heads:

Glory, glory, Hallelujah,
Glory, glory, Hallelujah,
Glory, glory, Hallelujah,
His truth is marching on.

The glowing effect of the wine remained with them. Many times they paused to nibble at the forest fruit and to throw themselves onto the soft cushions of fern.

"It's a wonderful planet," declared Captain Torkel.

"Best in the universe," said Fox.

"All," mumbled Kelly.

"And it's a long way home," said Lieutenant Washington suggestively, with a hiccough.

"A long, long way," commented Fox.

The lieutenant grumbled, "What did the people of Earth ever do for us?"

"Not a darned thing," said Fox. "Besides, I bet the sun has already exploded. That's what I bet."

"That Sirian sounded like he meant what he said, didn't he?"

"Sure he meant it. We'd be like gods."

"Captain," said Lieutenant Washington. "There's no use arguing any more. I'm going to stay here. To hell with Homo Sapiens!"

"To hell with Homo Sapiens!" repeated Fox.

The wine was still like hypnotic laughter in Captain Torkel's skull. "I — I don't know. It'd be nice to stay—"

They came to an object lying in the soft green grass, not far from the rocket.

"Hey, here's Van Gundy!" yelled Fox. "Van Gundy drank too much wine. Van Gundy's drunk!" He laughed and coughed and swallowed and then held his stomach and laughed again.

Lieutenant Washington began to sing:

What shall we do with a drunken spaceman,
What shall we do with—

"Shut up," said Captain Torkel,

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frowning. "Van Gundy wasn't with us. He didn't drink any wine."

They stood over Van Gundy. The singing stopped and the laughter stopped, and time, too, seemed to stop.

An ivory-handled knife was buried hilt-deep in Van Gundy's throat.

They carried the dead man to the shadow beneath the starboard side of the *Star Queen*. Each was a capped jug of solemn silence.

Captain Torkel withdrew the knife. "Van Gundy's," he muttered. "Van Gundy was killed with his own knife."

He knelt and wiped his blood-smeared hands on the grass. Then he saw Garcia squatting on the deck in the rocket's open airlock. A fan-nosed flame pistol dangled from the engineer's loose hand.

Captain Torkel walked up to him.

"Give me the pistol, Garcia."

Garcia didn't answer. His eyes were black pin-points in his hard, tight-lipped face. He raised the gun, leveled the barrel at the captain's chest.

"Give me the pistol. That's an order."

Garcia's face was a dark cloud of hatred and savagery.

"Garcia! I'm your captain! Give me the gun!"

The animal savagery faded from Garcia's face. He lowered the pistol and extended it by the barrel.

Captain Torkel moved forward and seized it. Then he puffed out his cheeks, blew breath from them, wiped sweat from his forehead.

Fox shouted, "The ports, Captain! Look at 'em! Look at the ports!"

The heavy, transparalite portholes of the *Star Queen* were ruthlessly pitted and chipped. Little pools of broken, shiny plastic lay on the grass beneath them. It was as if each port had been struck a hundred times with an axe.

Captain Torkel and Lieutenant Washington and Fox closed in on Garcia while Kelly stood smiling into the planet's sun.

"Did you do it, Garcia?" asked the captain. "Did you kill Van Gundy?"

Garcia still squatted on his haunches, dazed and staring. "I don't know."

"Did you try to smash the ports? Did Van Gundy try to stop you? Is that why you killed him?"

Garcia shook his head, bewildered.

"Why did you get the pistol?"

"I don't know."

"Did you and Van Gundy fight?"

No answer.

"Don't you remember anything?"

"I remember—" The engineer stopped, trembling.

"Yes, what do you remember?"

"I — I remember we decided not to go to the village, me and Van Gundy. We started back to the rocket. Then — then I remember you saying for me to give you the gun."

Fox said, "He's crazy, almost like Kelly. Whatever happened has made him almost crazy."

"Try to remember, Garcia. We got to know what happened."

"I can't remember."

"Retrograde amnesia," said Lieutenant Washington.

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Captain Torkel finally voiced the thought that had taunted him ever since the discovery of Van Gundy. "Garcia, were the Sirians here? Did *they* kill Van Gundy?"

Garcia began to cry...

They buried Van Gundy in the rich moist soil beneath the sea-blue sky and the blood-red sun. They made a cross from the gnarled limbs of forest trees and draped it with blue and yellow meadow flowers. In its center they hung his harmonica and his jetman's medallion with its silver-starred reproduction of the Big Dipper.

Captain Torkel spoke into the silence, and over the cool meadow flowed the words, "... Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death..."

They put away the shovel. They gave Garcia a sedative and tucked him into his bunk. They sat Kelly down in the grass and handed him a red flower to play with.

Then Captain Torkel and Lieutenant Washington and Fox stood gazing into each other's eyes.

"Say what you're thinking, Captain," said Lieutenant Washington.

Captain Torkel sighed. "All right. It adds up. The Sirians can read our minds. They know we want to bring our race here. They'll do most anything to stop us. They attacked the rocket, tried to break the ports. Garcia and Van Gundy tried to stop them. Van Gundy got killed, and Garcia scared them away with the pistol."

Lieutenant Washington squinted dubiously at the captain. "I can't believe that. Why would they be so nice to us in the village?"

"To keep us there as long as possible. To keep us away from the rocket."

"They could have killed us in the village."

"Maybe they really don't want to kill us — unless they have to. Maybe they'd rather persuade us not to return to Earth."

Fox grumbled, "You say maybe they don't like to kill. Then why would they kill Van Gundy?"

"Van Gundy was killed with his own knife. That looks like self-defense."

Lieutenant Washington cleared his throat. "There's just one thing wrong with your ideas. You say the Sirians are trying to bribe us into staying here, trying to win us over by kindness. Now you say they tried to smash the ports. If the Sirians are hostile in any way, they wouldn't combine those two conflicting methods."

Captain Torkel was silent for a moment. "The Sirians are an alien race. Leadership seems to be an unknown concept to them, even though Taaleeb unconsciously assumed a kind of leadership this afternoon. The point is that the race isn't used to carrying out unified plans of procedure. Taaleeb might have used *his* method in the village, and another group might have hit upon the plan of destroying the rocket."

Lieutenant Washington shook his head. "You're wrong, Captain. The Sirians are good, innocent, child-like. Here's what happened:

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Garcia liked to break things. He went wild and started to break the ports. Van Gundy tried to stop him and got himself killed. The shock gave Garcia amnesia."

Fox tugged at his beard. "I bet you're right, Lieutenant, I bet that's it." Eagerness rose in his tone. "How about tonight? Are we still going to see our companions?"

Captain Torkel spat. "You'd go to the village with Van Gundy's grave-dirt still on your hands?"

"We've been in a grave for six years. Is there any difference?"

Captain Torkel ignored the question. "We *can't* forget the people of Earth!" he said suddenly. "We've got to start home now. Can't you see what the Sirians are trying to do? They'll get us to stay here tonight, then—"

Lieutenant Washington snapped, "I told you I made up my mind, Captain. You want to give us six — no, twelve more years of darkness and loneliness and frustration. We won't take it. We'd be as mad as Kelly."

"Right!" Fox slapped his fist into his open palm. "We've got no other choice. We *got* to stay here!"

Captain Torkel's mouth became a hard, gray line. He stepped back, spread his legs apart, withdrew his flame-pistol. "Get in the rocket!" he burst. "That's an order!"

Lieutenant Washington laughed contemptously.

The captain repeated, "Get in the rocket! I'm your captain. So help me, I'll—"

"You'll do nothing," spat the rock-faced lieutenant. "Can you astrogate a rocket, Captain? Can you find your way back to Earth alone? Can you keep those engines going without Garcia or dodge those meteors without Fox? Go ahead and kill us. You might as well kill yourself, too. How about it, Fox?"

"Right," said Fox.

"And you, Kelly?"

"All," murmured Kelly.

"This is mutiny!" screamed Captain Torkel. "You can't — "

"We already have. Now get the hell away from here, Captain."

Despair fell upon Captain Torkel. His head sagged. The flame-pistol slipped from his fingers...

VI

The sun settled behind the forest horizon, its pale pink rays filtering through the branches of trees and angling onto the cool meadow. The glare was reflected by the silver rocket and by the cross above Van Gundy's grave and by the small harmonica and the jetman's medallion.

Captain Torkel stood alone before the grave. Laughter drifted faintly from within the rocket. It was a lonely sound to Captain Torkel. *You're really alone now,* he thought. *Apart from Earth, and now apart from the men. You and Van Gundy.*

To hell with it, he thought bitterly. Why not join the men? Why not bathe and shave and smell of lotion and put on a clean white dress uniform? Why not forget about an insignificant planet fifty trillion miles away?

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He pivoted toward the rocket, toward the laughter and the happy, getting-ready sounds. Then a small gust of wind sent Van Gundy's medallion tinkling against the grave-cross.

He paused. Through his mind passed a swirling vision of the people of Earth: the silent children too frightened to play in the sunlight, the white-faced women scanning the callous sky, the grim-lipped priests chanting ceaseless prayers. Two billion souls wrapped in a shroud of fear, counting off the swift seconds that carried them closer and closer to oblivion.

You can't force the men to go with you, he told himself. You can't make them believe that the Sirians are dangerous. You've got to make them *want* to return to Earth. And once they get to the village, they're lost. There's so little time...

He rubbed his chin. He was sure the Sirians had killed Van Gundy. If only Garcia could remember—

Suddenly he straightened.

Perhaps it was a blessing that Garcia did *not* remember!

Out of desperation that was like a prayer, a plan arose in his brain. It expanded and crystallized, then faded as memory slipped away like a rock under rising water. For a few moments he was a boy on a Dakota wheat farm, staring down at a strange grave.

Then the water receded; the rock remained. He was again Captain Torkel and the plan lay like an opened flower in his thoughts.

Please, God, don't let me forget now. Let me keep my memory for a while longer, just a little while longer.

His hand tight about his pistol, he strode across the meadow and plunged into the singing forest.

Rays from the sinking sun penetrated the foliage at intervals, creating islands of rainbow brilliance in the semi-darkness. Leaves fluttered above him. An orange-colored bird darted upward, releasing a cackle that was like shrill, old-woman laughter.

He moved slowly, hesitating, listening.

Soon he heard the low voices of Sirians. He stepped off the forest path, concealing himself in foliage. He tried to clear his mind so that the natives would not receive a telepathic warning.

The Sirians came nearer.

Captain Torkel counted: one, two, three, four, five. The first, he saw, was Taaleeb.

Perfect, he thought. *Thank you, God.*

He stepped out of the foliage.

Taaleeb's features broke into a smile. "Good evening, our friend from Earth-Star. We come to escort you back to our—"

The smile died. Alarm flooded his face.

Captain Torkel raised the pistol. "That won't be necessary. There's been a change in plan."

The Sirian's dark gaze speared into his skull. "Yes, I see," he murmured...

A few minutes later Captain Torkel returned to the meadow, the five scowling Sirians herded

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before him. Each carried an uprooted grapevine.

"You know what to do?" he asked, brandishing the pistol.

"Your mind has told us," said Taaleeb sullenly.

"I don't like to kill — no more than your people wanted to kill Van Gundy. But, like you, I will if I have to."

It seemed strange to Captain Torkel to see a snarl on Taaleeb's handsome features.

"You know everything," the Sirian muttered. "Your mind has guessed how we think and what we have done. Yet you are a fool. You could have had all I promised you — wine, food, happy nights!"

"But the others — the ones who stoned the rocket — would they have let you keep that promise?"

Taaleeb digested the question for a moment. "Perhaps not. And perhaps those others were wiser than Taaleeb. I see now that we should have killed you. I am sorry we did not — but perhaps even now it is not too late." His eyes were like dark, hot fires.

They walked across the meadow. The darkness was deepening, crawling like a hand over Van Gundy's grave.

"The pistol will be in my pocket," Captain Torkel cautioned his captives, "but it will be ready."

The Sirians nodded.

"And one more thing. *Smile.*"

The Sirians smiled.

They reached the *Star Queen* just as Lieutenant Washington and Fox and Kelly were stepping out of the airlock. Garcia stood behind them, sleepy-eyed, yawning off the effects of his sedative. The men stared first at the Sirians, then at Captain Torkel.

Lieutenant Washington said, threateningly, "Get out of here, Captain. We've made our decision."

"No," said Captain Torkel. "I'm going to join you. I'm going to the village, too."

"Hey!" exclaimed Fox. "He's going with us. Atta boy, Captain!"

"*Why?*" asked the stern-faced lieutenant.

"Because we won't have to return to Earth — not even if we wanted to. The Sirians are going in our place."

Garcia frowned. "Are you crazy, Captain?"

"No, I was just wrong about the Sirians, Garcia. They're good people, just like the lieutenant said. They like us. They want to help our people — and they're going to take the *Star Queen* back to Earth."

"That's impossible," spat Lieutenant Washington. "They're simple natives. They're ignorant. They couldn't astrogate that ship."

Of course not, thought the captain. *No more than we could sprout wings and fly back to Earth.*

He fought to keep his tone calm, convincing. "Why can't they? They're telepaths. They've gotten all our knowledge from our minds. They can be just as good in space as we are — maybe better. And they'll save humanity. Right, Taaleeb?"

"Right," said Taaleeb, smiling.

"Wonderful!" said Fox, clapping his hands. "Let's go to the village."

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"But they haven't the intelligence," protested Lieutenant Washington. "Captain, I think you're—"

"Look at the way they've learned to talk our language. Doesn't that indicate an extremely high intelligence?"

"That's right," agreed Fox. "It does, Lieutenant. Let's go, Captain. Ready?"

Garcia edged forward, blinking the drowsiness from his eyes. "How about Van Gundy, Captain? Who killed Van Gundy?"

Captain Torkel started to speak. The lie stuck in his throat. He telepathed, *You tell him, Taaleeb. You tell him the lie.*

Taaleeb said, "You killed him, friend Garcia. We have looked into your mind. We see what happened. You began to break the portholes. Friend Van Gundy tried to stop you. He had knife, you took knife. You killed him. You took the flame-weapon because you were afraid of what friend captain might do."

Garcia groaned. "God. Is that right, Captain? Is that what happened? I — I can't remember."

"I'm afraid so," sighed the captain. To himself, he said, *And I pray you never remember.*

Then he saw Taaleeb glancing anxiously toward the forest. How strong was the Sirian telepathic sense? Strong enough to send to the village for help?

His fingers were hot and moist on the pistol in his pocket. He struggled to put down the rising anxiety that threatened to overwhelm him.

"Taaleeb," he said, "better have your men take the vines aboard."

"Yes," said Taaleeb, smiling. The Sirians carried the vines to the airlock, laid them within.

"What's the idea of that?" asked Lieutenant Washington.

"It was their idea," the captain lied. "Those vines will grow rapidly in our hydroponics tanks. They'll produce something like a bottle of wine for each of them once a month. That'll be something to make their trip a little more pleasant. And *that* shows they're intelligent, doesn't it?"

He motioned toward the rocket. "The Sirians want to leave for Earth now, men. Get whatever gear you want out of the ship."

"They're leaving *now?*" asked Fox

"Of course. Tell them why, Taaleeb."

The Sirian said, "Because, as your friend captain says, we must allow a margin for error. Your sun may explode a day or two or three before the predicted time. Even if it does not, we wish to see your world as much as possible before its death."

Fox and Garcia started to enter the airlock.

"Wait," said Lieutenant Washington. "I don't think I like this."

Captain Torkel's heart pounded. *This may be it,* he thought. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean, these Sirians will be heroes to humanity, won't they?"

"I suppose so."

"And they'll return here with our race, or what's left of it, in twelve years?"

"Yes, God willing."

"Then what will our people think of *us?* What will they *do* to us?"

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This is it, the captain told himself. He could feel blood pulsing through his temples like drumbeats. "They won't like us for what we're doing. That's a cinch. But there's no other solution. You wouldn't want the Sirians *not* to go, would you?"

The lieutenant slowly shook his head. "No. Of course not."

"No," chorused Fox and Garcia weakly.

The lieutenant snapped, almost accusingly, "Then we'd be exiles from our own people. They'd call us traitors."

"Who cares?" said Fox.

"*I* care," grumbled the lieutenant.

Captain Torkel turned to Garcia. "How do you feel about this? Would you care?"

Garcia wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "I wouldn't care about *that.* To hell with it. But—"

"Yes?"

"I'm not sure if I like the idea of someone else doing my job for me. I'm a good engineer. I'm forty years old, and no one's ever had to do my job for me."

The captain pursed his lips. "Well, I suppose you two could relieve two of the Sirians and go to Earth while Fox and Kelly and I stay here."

Lieutenant Washington snorted, "You've changed, Captain. You used to be so damned anxious to get back to Earth. What's happened to you?"

The captain pretended to be in deep thought. "I suppose it's because it was hard for me to make that decision not to go back to Earth. When I did make it, it was a solid decision, one not easily changed. Besides, you said yourself that we couldn't take another six or twelve years in space, that we'd go mad."

"But it's different now. We've gotten some of the madness out of us. I haven't had a drink since this afternoon. Garcia's got rid of some of his hatred. Maybe killing Van Gundy was like a kind of shock treatment to him. And Fox—"

"He's right," Fox interrupted him. "I'm going to stay here. Don't try to talk me out of that. But I feel *cleaner* inside. I guess when you know that nobody'll stop you from stealing, you lose desire."

"Even Kelly's better," said the lieutenant. "Look at the way he's been talking."

Captain Torkel nodded. "Yes, and my memory's been better these past few hours. You know, men, I *do* keep thinking of what Taaleeb said. He said he wanted to see as much as possible of our world before its death. If those predictions should turn out right, we'd have a whole week to spend on Earth. I could see Dakota again, see the wheat and the sky and the hills."

Lieutenant Washington mused "And I could fly down to Louisiana, take a look at Maine, too. Maybe put some flowers on Mom's grave, make her ready to become warm again."

Garcia said wistfully, "And we could see Monterey and the boats and listen to the gulls. And maybe that old flower peddler Van Gundy knew is still in Frisco. I bet Van Gundy'd like us to find out." He began to laugh almost hysterically.

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"I'm going to stay here," declared Fox, "but we never thought of that week, did we? We kept thinking of being in space for twelve unbroken years. It wouldn't be that way at all."

Captain Torkel asked, "Wouldn't you like to see Broadway again, Fox? I'll bet they'll have it all lit up, all shining and proud and full of life. Wouldn't you, Fox?"

Fox gulped. Even in the gathering darkness, the captain saw tears in his eyes. "I — yes, Captain. I guess I would."

"And your wife, Fox?"

Fox wiped his eyes. "I don't know." Then he jerked backward. "I just thought of something. My wife'll be *here* in twelve years. She'll make the journey all right, make it if she has to take a rocket by herself and hold it together with hairpins. She'll locate me, too. When she finds out what I've—"

Fox suddenly stood very straight and heroic. "Captain, I'm going back to Earth — right now."

"And I," said Lieutenant Washington deeply.

"I *want* to go," said Garcia, his voice cracking, "but I'm a murderer. You don't want a murderer with you, do you?"

Captain Torkel glanced nervously toward the forest. He wasn't sure, but he thought he saw faint reflections of lights, and voices.

"We need you, Garcia. You've got to take care of those engines. We'll have a trial. Court is now in session. How do you plead?"

"I—"

"Guilty. Okay. Sentence suspended. Let's get aboard."

He kept his hand in his pocket, tight about the pistol. To Taaleeb he said, "Thanks, friend, but I guess we won't need your help after all." He shot out the thought: *Keep smiling, fellow. Keep smiling until the very last second.*

Fox slapped Kelly's face to gain his attention. "Kelly, we're going back to Earth. We're going home, back where your wife is. You want to come along or stay here alone?"

"Alone?"

"Alone."

"Kelly, Kelly—"

"Where, Kelly? To the village or to Earth? Damn you, say it!"

"Kelly go — Earth."

Captain Torkel leaned back in his crash-chair. The rocket shook under the vibration of thundering atomic engines. He flicked a switch. Acceleration began.

"Brace yourselves, men! Earth, here we come!"

Before the rising acceleration froze his movements, he snapped on the starboard visi-screen.

He stared only for a second.

He stared at the mass of Sirians filtering out of the dark forest, their sleek bodies illumined by the crimson glare from the jets and by the trembling fires from their touches.

They were like red devils, their faces contorted in rage and hatred as they poured over the meadow. Captain Torkel shivered at the sight of the knives, stones, clubs in upraised hands, at the savage mouths spitting forth alien oaths. This was what mankind would meet when the refugee ships began to land, twelve

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years hence... But they had twelve years to decide what to do about it.

Then the image was swept away in space like a red stone falling into the depths of a black pool.

Captain Torkel turned off the screen. Acceleration pushed him deeper and deeper into his chair.

Soon the thunder of the jets faded, and there was silence. The blackness of space pushed itself against the ports. Captain Torkel cut the engines.

"Beautiful Louisiana," said Lieutenant Washington in low, reverent tones, "and lovely Maine."

"Good old Broadway."

"And the gulls and boats at Monterey."

"And North Dakota."

"Heaven," mumbled Kelly.

END

★★★

THE MASKED WORLD

BY JACK WILLIAMSON

The planet hid itself from the Earthmen—and what lay behind the mask was fierce and deadly!

The planet wore a mask.

At ten million miles, it was a sullen yellow eye. At one million, a scarred and evil leer. Outside the smoking circle our landing-jets had sterilized, it was a hideous veil of hairy black tentacles and huge sallow blooms, hiding the riddle of its sinister genes.

On most worlds that we astronauts have found, the life is vaguely like our own. Similar nucleotides are linked along similar helical chains of DNA, carrying similar genetic messages. A similar process replicates the chains when the cells divide, to carry the complex blueprints for a particular root or eye or wing accurately down across ten thousand generations.

But even the genes were different here—enormously complicated. Here the simplest-seeming weed had more and longer chains of DNA than anything we had seen before. What was their message?

We had come to read it, with our new genetic micro-probe. A hundred precious tons of microscopic electronic gear, it was designed to observe and manipulate the smallest units of life. It could reach even those strange genes.

That was our mission.

Ours was the seventh survey ship to approach the planet. Six before us had been lost without trace. We were to find out why.

Our pilot was Lance Llandark. A lean hard man, silent and cold as

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the gray-cased micro-probe. We hated him—until someone learned why he had volunteered to come.

His wife had been pilot of the ship before us. When we knew that, we began to hear the hidden tension in his tired voice, monotonously calling on every band: "Come in, Six . . . Come in Six . . . "

Six never came in.

For two days, we watched the planet. The shallow ditch our jets had dug. The charred stumps. The jungle beyond—the visible mask of those monstrous genes—rank, dark, utterly alien.

At the third dawn, Lance Llandark took two of us out in a 'copter. Flying a grid over the landing area, we mapped six shallow pock-marks on that scowling wilderness, where our ships must have landed.

We dropped into the newest crater, where black stumps jutted like broken teeth out of queerly bare red muck. A yellow-scummed stream oozed across it. By the stream we found a fine-boned human skeleton.

A nightmare plant stood guard beside the bones. Its thick leaves were strangely streaked, twisted with vegetable agony, half poison spine and half blighted bloom. Shapeless blobs of rotting fruit were falling from it over those slender bones.

Lance Llandark stood up.

"Her turquoise thunderbird." He showed us the bit of blackened silver and blue-veined stone. "Back on Terra . . . Back when we were student pilots . . . We bought it from an Indian in an old, old town called Sante Fe."

He bent again.

"Lilith?" he whispered. "Lilith, what killed you?"

We found no other bones, nothing even to tell us what force or poison kept the creeping jungle back from that solitary plant. We left at dusk. Tenderly, Lance Llandark brought the gathered bones. Carefully we carried a few leaves and dried pods from that crazy sentinel plant. We found no other clue.

Patiently, day by forty-hour day, we searched the other sites. We found jet marks and stumps and teeming weeds, but nothing like that tormented nightmare over Lilith Llandark's skeleton. We found no wreckage. Nothing to show how the planet had murdered the lost expeditions.

Day by eternal day, the unknown leered from the secret places of its genes. It was all vegetable. We saw no animal movement, heard no cry or insect hum. The silence became suffocating.

Day after desperate day, we returned to the micro-probe.

"The answer's in the genes," Lance Llandark whispered grimly. "We've no other chance."

He kept the probe running on the strangest genes of all; those from the plant nightmare that had grown beside his wife. They were like nothing else on the planet. The double-stranded chains of DNA were monstrously long; many of the nucleotide links held copper or arsenic atoms.

"Queer!" Lance kept muttering. "No copper or arsenic in other plants here. I'd like to know why."

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He was running when we heard the woman scream. In that stifling quiet, her cry unnerved us all. We crowded down to the lock.

Tattered, stained with blood-colored juices, she slipped through those coiled, constricting creepers. She splashed out into the open ditch, waving a filthy rag. Halfway to the ship, she fell into the mud.

Lance Llandark led three of us to bring her in. She whimpered and looked up. Tears streaked the grime on her wasted face.

"Lance!" she gasped. "My dear."

"Lilith—" But he shrank back suddenly. "I found Lilith dead!"

"I am nearly dead." She tried weakly to get up. "You see, we're all marooned out there in the bush. Emergency landing, when we tried to get off. Wrecked our astrogation gear. Need your spare astro-pilot—"

"Back." He swung on us. "Back aboard!"

"What's wrong?" We were stunned, "She's your wife—"

"Aboard! Instanter!"

We obeyed his deadly voice.

"Help—" she whispered faintly behind us in the mud."Survivors—need astro-pilot—to plot our way home—"

The clanging lock cut off her voice.

Angrily we turned on Lance Llandark.

"Hold it!" he snapped. "I'm not crazy—the planet is. Come along to the micro-probe. I'm probing a seed from the plant we found by Lilith's bones. It puzzled me. So much of it was—"

In spite of the tension, he had to grope for a word to express meaning.

"Arbitrary! Those shapeless leaves, twisted stalk, that sterile seed. The copper and arsenic in those needless links. Too many genes had no function. No use at all!

"I'd just got the key, when that thing screamed. The copper and arsenic atoms are not genetic instructions to the plant. They're a message to us—words replicated a trillion times, and concealed in every cell of the plant!"

"Words?" someone whispered blankly. "Words in the atoms?"

"Written in binary code." His scowl was bleakly triumphant. "That weed's a mutant, you see. The real Lilith formed the first cell with her micro-probe. She left it—I suppose in her own body—as a message that no pseudo-Lilith could intercept."

Outside that something screamed again.

"Call each copper atom a dot," he whispered. "Call each arsenic a dash. Taken in order along the chains of DNA, they do encode a message. The computer's decoding it now."

He punched a button, and the printer whirred.

TO WHOEVER COMES . . . GIVE NO AID TO ANYONE . . . GET OFF THIS PLANET . . . ITS LIFE IS PSEUDOMORPHIC . . . DON'T LET IT LEAVE . . . JUST TAKE MY LOVE TO LANCE LLANDARK . . . FROM LILITH, HIS WIFE . . . AND GET OFF THIS PLANET, FAST . . .

Outside, it uttered a frantic, bubbling screech.

We did get off the planet, and we expect to stay away. END

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